**AN IDEAL HUSBAND**

**Biography of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)**

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin, Ireland, to prominent intellectuals William Wilde and Lady Jane Francesca Wilde. Though they were not aristocrats, the Wildes were well-off, and provided Oscar with a fine education. Oscar was especially influenced by his mother, a brilliantly witty raconteur, and as a child he was frequently invited to socialize with her intellectual circle of friends.

Wilde entered Trinity College in 1871 and focused his academic studies on the classics and theories of aestheticism. In 1874, he transferred to Oxford and studied under the divergent tutorials of John Ruskin (a social theorist and Renaissance man) and Walter Pater (a proponent of the new school of aestheticism). Wilde negotiated their conflicting philosophies as his personal life developed. He also experimented with cutting-edge fashion and experimented with homosexuality.

Upon graduating from Oxford, Wilde had a brief flirtation with Catholicism, but his independent orientation toward the world prevented an exclusive attachment to religion. In 1881, he published his first volume of verse (*Poems*), and he became famous enough to be satirized in a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera. He moved to Chelsea, an avant-garde neighborhood in London, but his father's death and the family's snowballing debts forced him to embark on a lecture tour of the United States in 1882. Upon arriving at customs, Wilde made his now-famous statement: "I have nothing to declare except my genius." On tour, he dressed in a characteristically flamboyant style. He advocated for the philosophy of the Aesthetic: art should exist solely for art's sake, or, as he wrote elsewhere, it should be "useless." While on tour in New York, Wilde also produced his first, unsuccessful play, *Vera*.

In 1884, Wilde married a shy and wealthy Irishwoman named Constance Lloyd, and the two moved into a posh house in London. Wilde briefly edited *Woman's World* magazine while writing a collection of fairy tales and a number of essays (collected later as *Intentions*, 1891,) which elaborated his unique approach to Aestheticism, a movement with which he was rather reluctant to associate himself. While Wilde had been socially and professionally linked to confirmed aesthetes such as Max Beerbohm, Arthur Symons, and Aubrey Beardsley, he was an open critic of the kind of reductive aesthetic philosophy expressed in the famous journal *The Yellow Book*. Preferring to explore his own thoughts about art and politics through idiosyncratic readings of Plato, Shakespeare, and contemporary painting, Wilde's social circle featured a diverse cast of characters, among them poets, painters, theater personalities, intellectuals, and London "rent boys" (male prostitutes). His closest friend, however, remained the Canadian critic and artist Robert Ross, who at times handled Wilde's publicity and acted as Wilde's confidant in his professional and personal affairs.

Throughout the 1890s, Wilde became a household name with the publication of his masterpiece novel, [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-picture-of-dorian-gray/), a Faustian tale about beauty and youth, as well as a string of highly successful plays, including [*Lady Windermere's Fan*](http://www.gradesaver.com/lady-windermeres-fan/) (1892), the Symbolist melodrama *Salome* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and [*An Ideal Husband*](http://www.gradesaver.com/an-ideal-husband/) (1895). His last play, [*The Importance of Being Earnest*](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-importance-of-being-earnest/) (1895), among his greatest, is considered the original modern comedy of manners. By this time, Wilde's extravagant appearance, refined wit, and melodious speaking voice had made him one of London's most sought-after dinner party guests.

In 1891, Wilde became infatuated with the beautiful young poet Lord Alfred Douglas (known as "Bosie"). The dynamic between Bosie and Wilde was unstable at the best of times, and the pair often split for months before agreeing to reunite. Still, the relationship consumed Wilde's personal life, to the extent that the sexual nature of their friendship had become a matter of public knowledge. In 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, accused Wilde of sodomy. Wilde replied by charging Queensbury with libel. Queensbury located several of Wilde's letters to Bosie, as well as other incriminating evidence. In a second trial often referred to as "the trial of the century," the writer was found guilty of "indecent acts" and was sentenced to two years of hard labor in England's Reading Gaol.

In 1897, while in prison, Wilde wrote [*De Profundis*](http://www.gradesaver.com/de-profundis/), an examination of his newfound spirituality. After his release, he moved to France under an assumed name. He wrote [*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-ballad-of-reading-gaol/) in 1898 and published two letters on the poor conditions of prison. One of the letters helped reform a law to keep children from imprisonment. His new life in France, however, was lonely, impoverished, and humiliating.

Wilde died in 1900 in a Paris hotel room. He retained his epigrammatic wit until his last breath. He is rumored to have said of the drab establishment that between the awful wallpaper and himself, "One of us has to go." Critical and popular attention to Wilde has recently experienced a resurgence; various directors have produced films based on his plays and life, and his writings remain a wellspring of witticisms and reflections on aestheticism, morality, and society.

## About An Ideal Husband

In the summer of 1893, [Oscar Wilde](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/oscar-wilde/) began writing [*An Ideal Husband*](http://www.gradesaver.com/an-ideal-husband/), and he completed it later that winter. At this point in his career he was accustomed to success, and in writing *An Ideal Husband* he wanted to ensure himself public fame. His work began at Goring-on-Thames, after which he named the character [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105), and concluded at St. [James](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7271) Place. He initially sent the completed play to the Garrick theater, where the manager rejected it, but it was soon accepted the Haymarket Theatre, where Lewis Waller had temporarily taken control. Waller was an excellent actor and cast himself as [Sir Robert Chiltern](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7104). The play gave the Haymarket the success it desperately needed. After opening on January 3, 1895, it continued for 124 performances. In April of that year, Wilde was arrested for 'gross indecency' and his name was publicly taken off the play. On April 6, soon after Wilde's arrest, the play moved to the Criterion Theatre where it ran from April 13-27. The play was published in 1899, although Wilde was not listed as the author. This published version differs slightly from the performed play, for Wilde added many passages and cut others. Prominent additions included written stage directions and character descriptions. Wilde was a leader in the effort to make plays accessible to the reading public. In 1897, he wrote a letter describing the process of writing *An Ideal Husband*, which was later published under the title [*De Profundis*](http://www.gradesaver.com/de-profundis/).

The play borrows from the style of Alexandre Dumas, where a theatrical device, in this case a letter, determines the outcome. Yet, Wilde keeps his work original by creating constant ironic plot twists and turns. The plot of *An Ideal Husband* was largely influenced by events in Paris in 1893. The directors of the Compagnie du Canal Interoceanique exploited shareholder funds, and similar political corruption lies at the heart of Wilde's play. In addition, some critics suggest that the play borrowed elements of mark Twain's *The Gilded Age*, and that the character of Sir Robert Chiltern might be modeled after two contemporary politicians: Sir Charles Duilke, a dining friend of Wilde's, or Charles Stuart Parnell. Sir Charles was the Liberal Party's Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 1880 to 1882 and President of the Local Government Board from 1882 to 1885, but his career suddenly ended in 1885 when his wife divorced him. Parnell was accused of political murder, but was acquitted. Soon after he was named in divorce proceedings and withdrew from public life.

An Ideal Husband is one of the most serious of Wilde's social comedies, and contains very strong political overtones, ironically and cynically examining the contemporary political landscape. The play's main focus is the often corrupt sources of great wealth, of which the public is usually ignorant. The characters and circumstances surrounding Sir Robert, [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107), and Baron Arnheim all mirror contemporary society and how finances increasingly influence political life. Within this political realm, the play notes how social power relies not on money, but rather on information and knowledge. In the play, secret knowledge allows Mrs. Cheveley to hold great power over Sir Robert Chiltern.

The play's action discusses and analyzes conflicts between public and personal morality, and examines the power of self-interest. Although Sir Robert is only honest when it is in his interest, Lady Chiltern, for all her talk of honor and morality, is often hypocritical in her inability to forgive others. The play does not contain a formula for public success, and Wilde maintains a very critical view of society. In the play, Wilde also examines the problematic nature of marriage, and portrays it as corrupt and corrupting. The Chilterns are foolish to try to have an "ideal" marriage based on materialistic values, such as property and high social standing. Wilde suggests a similarity between the absences of morality in their marriage and the lack of morality in the state's political/governing body.

Wilde crafts his characters as works of art, and demonstrates how their culture has taught them to behave with a certain amount of pretense. The play constantly moves toward a more ideal moral standard as the characters struggle with dishonesty, hypocrisy, double moral standards, materialism, and corruption of social and political life. Wilde's enduring message is that love, and not wealth, leads to happiness.

**Character List**

**Sir Robert Chiltern**

Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, a member of English society, and married to the honest and respectable Lady Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern is the hero of the play. Early in his public career Chiltern sold state secrets to Baron Arnheim, from which he became quite rich. The past comes back to haunt him when Mrs. Cheveley arrives at his home and blackmails him with evidence of his wrongdoing. Chiltern, who is powerfully dependent on his ill-gotten wealth, struggles between succumbing to Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail and living and honest life. Fortunately, he is saved from disgrace through a variety of happenstance occurrences, and in fact discovers an even greater happiness in his marriage and government work than he had known before his status and professional career were threatened.

**Lord Goring**

Lord Goring is a very clever and dashing man who lives a life of simple luxury and avoids professional pursuits. He is always impeccably dressed in the most up to date fashion, and demonstrates substantial intelligence and a penchant for acute analysis of human behavior. Ironically, he also prides himself on rejecting the expectations of society. A close friend of Sir Robert Chiltern, Goring wisely counsels him after Mrs. Cheveley, whom Goring was once engaged to, reveals her blackmail scheme. He also works to heal the wounds between Lady Chiltern and her husband and to destroy Mrs. Cheveley's evil scheme. Lord Goring is quite successful in these endeavors and in fact proves to be a hero of the play. In the final scenes of the play, he proposes to Mabel Chiltern, who accepts him.

**Lady Gertrude Chiltern**

Sir Robert Chiltern's extremely beautiful twenty-seven year old wife, champion of the Higher Education of women, a member of the Woman's Liberal Association, and a moral, upstanding citizen. Lady Chiltern also attended school with Mrs. Cheveley, and knows her to be dishonest and unkind. Lady Chiltern expects perfection from her husband, which makes it difficult for her to understand that he might have mistakes in his past. However, she loves her husband dearly and finally accepts that every man is somehow flawed.

**Mrs. Cheveley**

Mrs. Cheveley, who attended school with Lady Chiltern, is dishonest, selfish, and manipulative. The villain of the play, she arrives at the Chiltern's party and blackmails Robert Chiltern with a dishonest letter he wrote early in his public career that reveals state secrets for monetary gain. Mrs. Cheveley revels in wielding power over others and tells Sir Chiltern that in order to prevent her from publishing the letter, he must support her current financial scheme, the Argentinean Canal. Later, Lord Goring tricks her into admitting theft and successfully foils her scheme to destroy Robert Chiltern and his marriage.

**Mabel Chiltern**

Sir Robert Chiltern's sister. Mabel constantly teases Lord Goring and flirts with him throughout the play. She complains often that Tommy Trafford proposes to her in a most unpleasant manner. In the final scenes of the play, Lord Goring proposes to her and she accepts his hand.

**Lord Caversham**

Lord Goring's father, Caversham prides himself on dignity and honor. Caversham constantly belittles his dandy of a son publicly and privately, accusing him of an idle life and urging him to begin a professional career and marry.

**Lady Basildon**

Mrs. Marchmont's primary companion at the Chiltern party, she is a frequent complainer. The two women discuss a variety of "current" social issues, are highly superficial, and act as very basic, decorative characters in the plot.

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**Lady Markby**

A pleasant woman who is friends with Mrs. Cheveley and brings her to the Chiltern home. Lady Markby is very traditional in her views, rejecting higher education for women and longing for more simple days where women simply wished for the attention of a husband.

**Phipps**

Lord Goring's butler, Phipps represents the "dominance of form". He is known for his complete reticence, making him the "ideal butler".

**Vicomte de Nanjac**

A guest at the Chiltern's party, the Vicomte talks with many of the women. He asks Mabel to dance with him, recognizes Mrs. Cheveley from knowing her in Berlin five years previous, and excessively, almost comically, compliments the English language.

**Mr. Monford**

A secretary to Sir Robert Chiltern, also described as a dandy.

**Mason**

Sir Robert Chiltern's Butler, he announces all guests at the Chiltern home.

**James**

A footman

**Harold**

A footman for Sir Robert Chiltern

## Act I

Summary

The play opens at a party at [Sir Robert Chiltern](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7104)'s house in Grosvenor Square, London. The party exemplifies much of the play's tendency towards quick and witty conversation. The Chiltern home is regal and their guests are impeccably dressed. Much of the action takes place in the Chiltern home's Octagonal room. Lady Chiltern stands at the top of her regal staircase greeting arriving friends. Behind her, on the back wall, hangs Boucher's "Triumph of Love." The tapestry plays a prominent role in the play, and highlights the theme of love conquering all.

This first scene consists of many conversations between various guests. [Mrs. Marchmont](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7265) and [Lady Basildon](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7264) discuss the tedious, boring and uninteresting Hartlock parties, and the triviality of men. Mrs. Marchmont mentions that she has come to the party to be educated, while Lady Basildon admits she despises education. Mrs. Marchmont notes that Lady Chiltern is often encouraging her and others to expand their educations and find purpose in life, which seems to be a futile pursuit as few in London society take their lives or careers very seriously.

As the act continues, additional characters enter and converse, all announced by the butler who stands at the door. [Lord Caversham](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7263) enters and asks for his 'good-for-nothing' son. [Mabel Chiltern](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7262) asks him why he speaks so ill of [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105), and Lord Caversham explains that his son leads an idle life. Mabel Chiltern disagrees, and Lord Caversham calls her charming. Caversham also admits being sick of London Society while Mabel thinks it is lovely and composed of beautiful idiots and brilliants lunatics, Lord Goring included.

[Lady Markby](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7266) and [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107) enter next. Mrs. Cheveley is a striking woman who demands attention. She wears a purple (heliotrope) gown, bright red lipstick, and has red hair. Lady Markby greets Lady Chiltern warmly, but Lady Chiltern suddenly recognizes Mrs. Cheveley and greets her with a distant bow. She explains that they knew each other in their school days. Mrs. Cheveley, who has been in Vienna for many years, is obviously overly sweet to her cold acquaintance, and describes her eagerness to meet Sir Robert Chiltern, as he is well known in Vienna. Lady Chiltern is taken aback by this comment and before quickly moving away, assures Mrs. Cheveley that she and her husband have very little in common.

The [Vicomte de Nanjac](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7268), a young anglophile who spices up the play with comical malapropisms, approaches as Lady Chiltern moves off, and flirts with Mrs. Cheveley. Sir Robert Chiltern enters, greets Lady Markby, and meets and compliments Mrs. Cheveley. She responds by saying that any acquaintance that begins with a compliment is sure to develop into a true friendship. She tells Sir Robert that she knew his wife at school, but unlike Lady Chiltern she never received any good conduct prizes. Sir Robert inquires as to whether she is a pessimist or an optimist and she claims she is neither. Mrs. Cheveley notes that her only pleasure is politics. Next, she asks for a tour of his house, and casually references Baron Arnheim, whom she claims to have known intimately and is a previous acquaintance of Chiltern. Sir Robert starts at the name and appears distraught.

Lord Goring arrives. He is a British dandy, one who plays with life, dresses well, socializes extensively and likes to be misunderstood. Sir Robert introduces him to Mrs. Cheveley, and it appears they have met before. Lording Goring then turns to Mabel Chiltern and the two easily fall into a flirtatious banter. Vicomte de Nanjac interrupts and asks Mabel if he may escort her to the music room. She is clearly disappointed and tries to get Lord Goring to follow them, but he remains in the Octagon room.

Lord Caversham approaches his son and demands to know what he is doing at the party. He accuses him of a wasted life, and claims London society has gone to the dogs. Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont approach Lord Goring and begin complaining about their annoyingly perfect husbands. Lord Goring sympathizes with them, and they soon start gossiping about Mrs. Cheveley.

As the guests all go to dinner, the action returns to Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley, who remain in the Octagon room. Mrs. Cheveley explains her stay in England depends upon him and tells him about the Argentine Canal Company, which she calls a "great political and financial scheme." Sir Robert was involved in the Suez Canal endeavor as Lord Radley's secretary, but he does not think highly of this new venture. While Mrs. Cheveley believes it a daring speculation, he calls it a swindle. She admits to investing heavily in it based on the advice of Baron Arnheim. Sir Robert admits that the following night he will give a report to the House suggesting the scheme will not succeed. Mrs. Cheveley urges him not to make the report in both her interest and in his own, which offends Sir Robert. Finally, Mrs. Cheveley reveals that she possesses a letter Sir Robert wrote to Baron Arnheim when he was Lord Radley's secretary. In the letter, Sir Robert sold a Cabinet secret, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares three days before the government announced the purchase of it. Through this unscrupulous act Sir Robert made his current fortune, and Mrs. Cheveley threatens to hand the letter over to the newspapers if he does not publicly support her scheme. Sir Robert's public image and career would be ruined. Mrs. Cheveley refuses any money in exchange for the letter and leaves no negotiating room. Finally, Sir Robert gives in and tells her he will withdraw the report. He leaves the room.

The guests return from the dining room and Mrs. Cheveley speaks with Lady Chiltern and reveals she has gained Sir Robert's support in the canal scheme. Lady Chiltern does not believe this news and claims her husband's principles are stronger than that. She is quite troubled. Sir Robert returns to escort Mrs. Cheveley to her carriage.

Lord Goring and Mabel converse and Mabel finds a brooch half-hidden in a sofa. Lord Goring immediately recognizes it and explains that he gave it someone as a gift years ago. He asks her to notify him first if anyone asks about it. Mabel agrees and bids him goodnight.

When everyone has left, Lady Chiltern confronts Sir Robert about Mrs. Cheveley's canal scheme claim. She explains that in their schooldays Mrs. Cheveley was dishonest and evil. Sir Robert argues that she should not be judged by her past, but Lady Chiltern claims that the past defines one's character. Sir Robert admits he has agreed to support the scheme, but his wife knows something is amiss. She suspects he has altered his principles, and asks why is suddenly behaving in such a different manner. He explains that circumstances dictate his choice, but she claims circumstances should never change principles. In a passion, Lady Chiltern tells her husband it is never necessary to do the dishonorable deed, and that power and money are nothing in themselves. She claims she loves him because he has always been ideal and honest. She begs him to continue being the honorable man she knows and loves and to not kill her love for him. Sir Robert denies that he has any secrets and Lady Chiltern urges him to immediately write Mrs. Cheveley to explain he will not support the scheme after all. She stands over him, praising him, as he writes the letter. They declare their love for each other. The scene closes with Sir Robert calling the butler to deliver the letter, and the chandelier lighting up the "Triumph of Love" tapestry.

**Analysis**

Wilde creates his characters as artistic objects within society, and through their conversations and seemingly carefree banter, explores the themes of love, loyalty and honor. Wilde's writing, which relies on these sorts of conversation, is often referred to as epigrammatic. An epigram is defined as a concise and witty statement that expresses insight and is often ironic in tone. The opening act contains many epigrammatic statements, including Mrs. Marchmont's claim of abhorring education, and Lord Goring's claim that the only thing he knows anything about is nothing. Clearly, neither truly believes these statements, but there is truth to them. Wilde's reliance on epigrammatic conversation forces the reader to determine when there is seriousness in such statements, and when they are simply witty and somewhat false tools used to extend somewhat meaningless conversation. As such, Wilde successfully weaves the most serious themes of the play in with the most frivolous of its banter and conversation.

Throughout the party that takes up the majority of the first act, the guests and hosts are highly concerned with their appearance and the nature of their social interactions. All the guests are members of London "society" and spend much of their lives in similarly superficial scenarios. Thus, they are all present themselves very specifically, through well defined performances. The selves they present in these social interactions are specific to such events, and not necessarily true representations. The most notable character that presents a false veneer in this social event is Mrs. Cheveley. She sees this party as a chance to perform, and brings with her a powerfully false sense of saccharine kindness in her interactions with Lady Chiltern. Even during her interactions with Sir Robert, she maintains a veneer of civility when threatening his very reputation. Wilde's use of the party to introduce each character is fascinating, as the reader learns how the characters wish to be seen in such social gatherings rather than whom they truly are. Here, we begin to see the disconnect between the "ideal" and the "real".

Act I also deals extensively with the role of women in society, and the dialogue between Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley touches briefly on this topic. Sir Robert implies that the issue of the nature of women is a modern topic - he asks her if she thinks science can grapple with the problem of women. His question suggests that he sees women as very complex, but also acknowledges the increasing role women play within society, and the complex issues that arise from this. Mrs. Cheveley's words suggest a more traditional view of women; that women cannot be understood and should be viewed as aesthetic pieces of art. In fact, Wilde describes many of the female characters in this opening act as works of art, and even notes that Watteau would have loved to paint some of them.

The tapestry of the "Triumph of Love" plays a prominent thematic role in this opening act and the remainder of the play. Love and what defines it in its purest and strongest form is clearly of great importance to the main theme of the play, marriage. Lady Markby arrives at the party and notes that people now marry as many times as possible because it is in fashion. When introducing Mrs. Cheveley to Sir Robert she comments that families are very mixed nowadays, and Lord Goring revels in his status as a bachelor. Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont ironically sympathize with each other over their overly perfect husbands, which mocks the idea of a perfect marriage. Mrs. Cheveley states that in the London season, people are "either hunting from husbands, or hiding from them." Much of this act discusses the confusion and conflict inherent in marriage, while Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert represent an ideal marriage.

The conversation between Lady Chiltern and her husband in the conclusion of the first act provides a strong contrast to the frivolous banter that dominated the party scene. They address each other with earnestness, intimacy, and powerful emotion. Lady Chiltern states that her love for Sir Robert rests on his ideal morality, purity and honesty. When presented with his request for a moral compromise, Lady Chiltern refuses. She can only love him in his ideal and pure state. Later on, she will be confronted with her idealistic perspective, but in this act, it dominates and defines their marriage.

Interestingly, the theme of politics is powerfully interwoven with that of love and marriage. In the play, choices regarding ethical political behavior relate directly to the triumph or failure of love. Lady Chiltern clearly represents a strong adherence to the ideal, while Mrs. Cheveley represents the opposite. These two forces of good and evil pull on Sir Robert Chiltern, forcing him to define himself and his life as either an ideal or morally imperfect husband.

## Act II

**Summary**

The act begins with Sir Robert and [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105) in the Chiltern house discussing how to manage the crisis put in action the preceding night. Goring appears somewhat unsettled by Chiltern's moral failure and urges him to tell his wife the truth about his past as soon as possible. Robert, who kept the secret to maintain his wife's idealistic view of him, is concerned she will never forgive his impurity. Lord Goring, in a serious and weighted tone in stark contrast to the preceding act, still urges him to be honest and promises to talk with Lady Chiltern about the negative influence of expecting and accepting only perfection.

Chiltern tells Lord Goring about his history with Baron Arnheim and the circumstances of his ill-gotten fortune. Despite his name and family, Chiltern was poor while under the Baron's mentorship. As an impressionable young man, he took the Baron's advice about the importance of wealth and money to heart, and therefore took advantage of an opportunity to ensure his financial stability. Sir Robert vehemently says that his decision to sell government secrets to the Baron was an act of courage and not weakness. He also admits that he has not felt regret for it. Lord Goring expresses sorrow for his friend, but Sir Robert talks about how he paid his debt with his guilt, and by giving to charity. After hearing about Chiltern's past, Lord Goring responds with potential actions to take to quell the coming storm, and concludes he must fight against [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107)'s blackmail. Chiltern aggress, but recoils at the thought of telling Lady Chiltern, saying that it would kill her love for him. At this point, Goring reveals that he and Mrs. Cheveley were once engaged. Sir Robert decides to write a letter to Vienna to investigate Mrs. Cheveley's life and dig out any scandals that might weaken her power against him. Goring reluctantly concedes this plan, but also explains that he believes Mrs. Cheveley would revel in a scandal rather than run from it.

Lady Chiltern then arrives from the Woman's Liberal Association, and asks Lord Goring to stay for tea. Lord Goring engages in a light banter with her about her bonnet. She leaves briefly, in which time Sir Robert gratefully thanks Lord Goring, but Lord Goring says he has not done anything for him yet. Sir Robert tells him that at the very least he has allowed him to tell the truth. When his wife returns he escapes by giving the excuse that he has letters to write.

Lord Goring and Lady Chiltern have an interesting conversation where Lord Goring becomes serious and talks with Lady Chiltern about the situation with Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Chiltern only knows that she tried to persuade Sir Robert to support her financial scheme, and she firmly believes it would be a stain on his character. Lord Goring discusses a hypothetical situation to test Lady Chiltern's understanding of her husband's true situation, but she cannot imagine him doing such a foolish thing. Lord Goring tells her that her views on life are quite hard and unforgiving of people's natural tendency to make mistakes. He explains that love is the only thing that can explain the world. Lady Chiltern asks Lord Goring if he is a pessimist, and he tells her that life must be lived with charity, and only through charity can life be understood. Finally, with intense seriousness of which Lady Chiltern takes note, he offers her help whenever she needs it.

Mabel arrives and proclaims that seriousness does not suit Lord Goring. He tells her that he must be leaving, which causes her to comment on his bad manners. They exchange light banter for several more minutes before Lord Goring finally leaves. Mabel asks Lady Chiltern to speak to Tommy Trafford for her, because he constantly proposes to her in awkward situations. Lady Chiltern responds by saying Tommy has a bright future, while Mabel claims she will never marry anyone with a bright future.

[Lady Markby](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7266) and Mrs. Cheveley arrive. Mabel starts to leave, but speaks with the two guests first. Lady Markby tells her that she is becoming very modern, which can be dangerous in that one might suddenly become out of date. Mabel leaves and Lady Markby tells Lady Chiltern they have come to find Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch, which she lost. As they wait for the [Mason](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7270), Lady Markby comments that London has become over populated. The Mason arrives explaining that no bracelet has turned up overnight. The ladies wait for tea. Lady Markby makes a derogatory comment about the Higher Education of Women, and Lady Chiltern proclaims that she and her husband are great champions of women's rights.

They continue to discuss the education of men, their husbands, and the modern woman. Lady Markby declines tea and goes out for a short visit to a nearby friend. She leaves Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley together. Mrs. Cheveley comments that Lady Markby talks more but says less than anyone she has ever met. Lady Chiltern remains standing and coldly tells her that had she recognized Mrs. Cheveley from their schooldays she would never have invited her to her party the previous night. Mrs. Cheveley appears amused and notes Lady Chiltern has not changed. Mrs. Cheveley discovers that Lady Chiltern made Sir Robert write a letter revoking his promise to support her financial scheme and demands Sir Robert reverse his decision. Sir Robert enters the room, and Mrs. Cheveley angrily tells Lady Chiltern that Sir Robert is fraudulent and dishonest and sold a cabinet secret to a stockbroker to gain his fortune. Lady Chiltern asks Sir Robert if the story is true, and he orders Mrs. Cheveley from his house.

Lady Chiltern begs her husband to deny these accusations, but he does not, and moves towards her to console her. She warns him off, and cries out that he lied to the whole world but will not lie to her. She thrusts him off her, and in dismay wonders why she made him her ideal in life and worshipped him. Sir Robert passionately proclaims that this was her mistake, and one that all women make. He wonders aloud why all women cannot love men with all their faults. Why do they place their men on pedestals? In contrast, he says, men love women with their imperfections, and it is in all their imperfection that men need love. He tells his wife she has made a false idol of him, and he was not strong enough to show her his imperfections. Now, in losing her love she has ruined his life.

**Analysis**

Lord Goring and Robert Chiltern agree that men do corrupt things everyday, but Lord Goring points out that is the reason why they are all so eager to expose one another, because it takes attention away from their own dishonesty. Sir Robert explains how his access to private information was nothing new, and that all modern fortunes are built on such information. Wilde understood the power of information from contemporary events, and throughout the plot, information (the letters), rather than money, is the source of power.

Once again Sir Robert references the idea of modernity, and how in this new age information leads to wealth and power. He tells Lord Goring about Baron Arnheim's formula for success in the modern day: wealth, which leads to domination. Ironically, Lord Goring who is the picture of a Victorian dandy and revels in the superficial aspects of life, disagrees with this theory. Wilde criticizes this philosophy throughout the play by effectively making wealth useless. Sir Robert cannot buy his way out of his predicament and Mrs. Cheveley laughs at the fact that he would even try. In the realm of the play, money has little power.

Sir Robert's primary concern is detection. He fears his wife will hate him and his career will be ruined. With frustration he asks Lord Goring whether a foolish mistake made in his youth should cost him so much. His corruption does not cause him any real sense of guilt or regret, and he justifies it by pointing out others who have done the same. He thanks Lord Goring for enabling him to tell the truth, but in reality he only tells it because he knows Lord Goring will not judge him for it. Thus, he is willing to face the truth only when there are no consequences attached. Sir Robert's words connect with Wilde's disdain for the lack of morality in contemporary society, especially the loose moral principles of politicians. One of the main themes of the play is society's moral corruption. Wilde criticizes the way characters gravitate towards material possessions, such as wealth, rather than cherishing the importance of kindness and love. Even Lady Chiltern, for all her moral sermons, is hypocritical, for she values Sir Robert's social status.

When Lady Chiltern enters the scene, and tells the two men she has been at a meeting for the Women's Liberal Association, Lord Goring mocks her and asks if they discussed bonnets. The question of a woman's role in society and marriage constantly arises, and Lord Goring clearly sees women's work as rather trivial. This scene engages with the topic of what a woman's proper role is within society and marriage, as does the discussion between Lady Markby, Lady Chiltern, and Mrs. Cheveley, when Lady Markby argues that the House of Commons is the worst thing to happen to marriage since the higher education of women. As a member of the more conservative part of London society, Lady Markby does not believe in the advancement of women, while Lady Chiltern, as a member of the Women's Liberal Association, clearly does. The differences between these two women, and Lady Chiltern's constant defense of women's rights and liberal values demonstrates that this new, modern perspective of a more independent woman was just beginning to gain strength in the Victorian era.

Lord Goring becomes quite serious in his conversation with Lady Chiltern, which is a contrast from his lighthearted behavior at the party the night before. After acting as a confidant and advisor to her husband, he acts as a teacher to Lady Chiltern, telling her that her views on life are rather harsh and she must understand that all people are flawed. Lady Chiltern says that she loves her husband, but really she adores the version of him that she has created - the Sir Robert who exemplifies the best of English life. If he must be perfect, how sincere can her love be? Lord Goring tells Lady Chiltern that it is love, and not German philosophy, that truly explains the world, and that one must live life with charity towards others. His speech ties together several themes that continually arise throughout the play, specifically that love and forgiveness must guide one through life. With this statement, the readers begin to see that the truth will come out and forgiveness will be necessary for the Chiltern marriage to survive.

Mabel's complaints about Tommy Trafford, who insistently and secretly proposes to her, provide a comic interlude, but also again discuss the notion of marriage. Mabel complains that she wouldn't find the whole process so frustrating if his statements had any kind of effect on the public. Apparently, it is not his proposals that bother her so much, but the way in which he proposes. She wishes his feelings were in the public domain, and believes only then they would be worth responding to. Mabel wants public intrusion in her life, while such public intrusion threatens to ruin Sir Robert's public career and his marriage.

The definition of love and marriage is at the heart of the action here. The lighthearted conversation of the first act is replaced by a more serious tone that analyzes and discusses the morality of human beings and why and how people should love each other. Lord Goring, who often carries the voice and opinions of the author, mocks Lady Chiltern's expectations of moral perfection. Lord Goring finds it a shame that Lady Chiltern cannot accept her husband, faults and all. This analysis of love supports the social values and gender inequality of the Victorian era. [Sir Robert Chiltern](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7104) argues that a man's love allows for faults and errors, while a woman's love is unforgiving and demanding of unattainable perfection. Although this analysis of love presents the image of the unyielding woman, the play will actually conclude with Lady Chiltern forgiving and supporting her husband. Thus, the play depicts the woman's role of a caregiver and supporter of her male counterparts, a classic Victorian perspective.

The climax of this act is Lady Chiltern's discovery of her husband's moral faults. She is shocked and sees a new person in her husband's skin, claiming, "what a mask you have been wearing all these years!" The images presented by all the party guests and the hosts the night prior are the pieces of themselves people want the public to see. With the revelation of Sir Robert's fallibility, this false image of perfection and the socially acceptable image are torn down. Now, the reader is left to wonder if Lady Chiltern will manage to overcome the reality of a husband who is imperfect. She must determine what true love means, and how to define an ideal marriage.

## Act III

**Summary**

The third act opens in [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105)'s house while he prepares to go out for the evening. There is a description of the room and of [Phipps](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7267) the butler who Wilde describes as the "dominance of form." In the stage notes, Phipps is referred to as the "ideal butler," and his main distinction is his impassivity. Lord Goring enters in very fine attire, and Wilde proclaims that he masters modern life as the first well-dressed philosopher. Goring speaks to Phipps, but the conversation is clearly very one-sided as Goring espouses about fashion, society, and his buttonhole through a series of epigrams. Throughout the conversation Phipps simply plays the yes man and demonstrates no discernible personality. Phipps hands him three letters delivered earlier in the day. One is from Lady Chiltern, who wrote, "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." The letter is not addressed to anyone, but it is signed "Gertrude".

[Lord Caversham](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7263) enters to the dismay of his son. He makes himself comfortable and makes it clear he wants to have a serious talk. He tells Lord Goring that he must be married, and since bachelors are no longer in fashion, he must do so at once. While Lord Caversham calls him heartless, Lord Goring resorts to trivial discussion of his buttonhole. They move into the smoking room, and Lord Goring comments on the state of sympathy in the modern world. His father takes his comment as a paradox and wonders aloud whether his son understands what he says. The conversation between the two men is quite lengthy and demonstrates the differences in age and perspective between them. Lord Caversham complains of a draught in the room, and Goring suggests they move to the smoking room. As Caversham goes into the smoking room, Lord Goring takes an aside to instruct Phipps that a lady is calling on him and to show her into the drawing room to wait for him. He tells Phipps that it is the matter of gravest importance and that no one else but this lady should be admitted. Lord Goring then attends to his father in the smoking room.

[Harold](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7272) the footman shows [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107) in. She asks for Lord Goring, and Phipps explains he is presently with Lord Caversham. He also tells her that Lord Goring has asked if she would be kind enough to wait in the drawing room, where he will come to her. Mrs. Cheveley is surprised that Lord Goring seems to expect her. Phipps explains that Goring told him if a lady were to call he should have her wait in the drawing room, and he opens the drawing room door for Mrs. Cheveley. Mrs. Cheveley makes a comment to herself about how expecting the unexpected shows a modern intellect, and then looks into the drawing room. She declares that it is a dreary bachelor's room and that she will have to alter all this.

Mrs. Cheveley begins wondering what woman Lord Goring is waiting for and looks forward to "catching" him. She rifles through Goring's papers and correspondence and after recognizing Lady Chiltern's handwriting on one of the letters, reads it. A "look of triumph" appears on her face. She almost steals the letter but Phipps appears in the room. He tells her the candles are lit in the drawing room and she follows him in. After Phipps retires, she sneaks back towards the writing desk in the other room, but hears voices from the smoking room growing louder an quickly retreats to the drawing room.

Lord Goring and Lord Caversham argue about marriage. Goring wants to choose the girl, time and place for himself. Caversham believes he would make a foolish decision. Goring escorts Lord Caversham to the door and somewhat helplessly returns with [Sir Robert Chiltern](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7104). Chiltern says he is so glad to find Goring at home, but Goring replies that he is very busy and cannot see him. Chiltern tells him that his wife has discovered everything from Mrs. Cheveley and that Goring must talk with him. He buries his face in his hands. Upon questioning from Lord Goring Chiltern says he has heard back from Vienna and that nothing valuable was sent. He only learned that Mrs. Cheveley occupies a high position in society and that Baron Arnheim left a lot of his wealth to her. Robert keeps repeating that he doesn't know what to do and asks Goring if he can trust him, to which Goring replies in the affirmative. When Goring goes out to speak with Phipps he discovers that the lady he was expecting is waiting in the drawing room. Thinking that the lady is Lady Chiltern he decides that he will give her advice through the door with his conversation with Robert Chiltern.

Returning to Robert, Goring asks him if he loves his wife, and Robert replies that he loves her more than anything in the world. Goring then says that since Lady Chiltern loves him she will forgive. Goring tries to get Chiltern to leave but Chiltern says he must stay for five minutes to tell him what he is going to say in the House on this night about the Argentine Canal deal. There is a sound of a chair falling from the drawing room. Chiltern wants to know who has been listening to his secrets. Goring denies anyone is there, but Chiltern insists that someone must be in the drawing room. He demands to see for himself.

Chiltern rushes to the door and Goring finally admits that someone is inside who cannot be revealed. Chiltern goes in anyway and Goring is dismayed thinking Lady Chiltern has been discovered. Sir Robert returns looking angry and asks for an explanation. Goring, who does not yet know that Mrs. Cheveley is in the drawing room, says that the lady is stainless and guiltless of all offenses. Chiltern replies that she is a vile and infamous thing. Goring goes on trying to defend the woman he thinks is Lady Chiltern, while Sir Chiltern continues to throw insults and accusations at Mrs. Cheveley and also Lord Goring, calling him a false friend and an enemy.

Sir Robert leaves and Mrs. Cheveley reveals herself to an astonished Lord Goring. He recovers from his shock quickly and the two begin talking. Lord Goring correctly guesses she has come to give him Sir Robert's letter to Baron Arnheim. We learn that in their youth, Mrs. Cheveley seduced Lord Goring for financial gain. However, she claims her love for him is stronger than ever, and says she will hand over the letter if Lord Goring marries her. She explains that she wants to settle down in London, and that when she saw Goring at the party the previous night, she realized he was the only person she ever cared for. Lord Goring responds by claiming he would be a very bad husband and indicates he does not wish to marry. Mrs. Cheveley says she expected him to show self sacrifice by marrying her to save Sir Robert's career, but Lord Goring replies that he believes self-sacrifice should be outlawed because it is so demoralizing to those it benefits.

Mrs. Cheveley says nothing can demoralize Chiltern's character based upon his corruption, and Goring jumps to his defense saying it was not worthy of him and merely a mistake of youth. Mrs. Cheveley comments on how men stand up for each other, and Goring replies that women are always at war with each other. Mrs. Cheveley explains the only woman she is at war with is Lady Chiltern. Mrs. Cheveley readies to leave and wants to shake hands with Lord Goring but he refuses, saying there can be no forgiveness for what she did to the gentle Lady Chiltern. Mrs. Cheveley says she had not gone to Lady Chiltern with the purpose of revealing her husband's guilt, but had in fact visited with [Lady Markby](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7266) to ask about a brooch lost at the party. Lord Goring asks if it is a diamond snake brooch with a ruby, and Mrs. Cheveley confirms that it is. Goring has meanwhile pulled the brooch from his drawer. He tells her he found it and deftly puts it on her arm. Mrs. Cheveley is surprised, as she didn't know it could be used as a bracelet. Goring says it looks better on her than the last time he saw it, which was ten ago on Lady Berkshire to whom he gave it as a wedding present. Goring accuses Mrs. Cheveley of stealing the brooch, although at the time a servant was accused and disgraced. She denies it, and tries in vain to remove the bracelet. Goring explains that the spring clasp is impossible to find unless you are shown where it is. Mrs. Cheveley becomes panicked, scratching at her wrist. Lord Goring, who has gained all the power in this interaction threatens to have his servant fetch the police. Terrified, Mrs. Cheveley asks him not to, saying she will do anything for him. He demands Sir Robert's letter to Baron Arnheim, and after some stalling she gives it to him. Afterwards, she asks for a drink of water.

When Lord Goring's back is turned she steals Lady Chiltern's letter. She then tells Lord Goring she is going to render Sir Robert Chiltern a great service by showing him how he has been deceived in his marriage, and explains she will forward Lady Chiltern's apparent love letter to Sir Robert. Goring tells her to give it back, threatening force. He rushes toward her but she presses the servant bell and Phipps enters. Slyly, she tells Phipps that Goring rang him so he could show her out. She leaves with a look of triumph.

**Analysis**

In the opening stage directions, Wilde describes Lord Goring as a master of modern life. In the next scene, Lord Goring tutors Phipps about fashion, falsehoods, and vulgarity with many of Wilde's epigrams that highlight Goring's selfish view of the world. Goring describes vulgarity as a problem of "others", and refined behavior as characteristic of the individual. Ironically, Goring is clearly extremely self-involved, but also is the only character working to save his friends' marriage and protect their images. Although Lord Goring represents generosity and is a good friend throughout the play, he still remains a very egotistical character. His attention to a buttonhole is so trivial that one might consider it an allegory for other characters' obsession with other materials, such as social status or wealth. Throughout this opening scene, Phipps is a comedic tool with an impassive demeanor, responding to all of Goring's statements without emotion and with simple agreement and affirmation.

Lord Goring receives a letter from Lady Chiltern, and resolves to make her stand by her husband, Sir Robert Chiltern. In his view, every woman must stand by her husband, and he laments the growth of moral sense in women, which he believes is responsible for making the institution of marriage hopeless and one-sided. The validity of this claim is questionable at best, but reminds the reader that Wilde wants to emphasize the foolishness of the Chilterns for trying to construct the perfect marriage.

Lord Goring and his father Lord Caversham have a very lengthy discussion that presents the opposition of their world views. Lord Caversham, an aged and respected man, represents conservative London society and the morals of the Victorian era, which encourage a focus on family and public and private success. However, his son is a dandy who lives beyond the restrictions conservative society would impose on him, is extremely narcissistic, and places pleasure, beauty and idleness at the forefront of his life. The two men find it very difficult to see eye to eye. In fact, throughout their conversation, Lord Goring's wit and irony are hard for Lord Caversham to follow and result in his general confusion. Lord Caversham argues that his son should marry for practical reasons such as property and name, while Goring plans to marry only for love. His father sees an immediate need to take action, but Goring claims he is still a young man and need not think so seriously about such things. In reality, Goring is in his mid thirties, and as a dandy is living his life with a false sense of youth. In addition, Lord Caversham urges Lord Goring to enter some kind of professional work and perhaps follow the example of Sir Robert Chiltern who is such a noble servant of the government. The irony of this suggestion is quite clear.

In his conversation with Sir Robert Chiltern, Lord Goring focuses on two aspects of the situation: love and forgiveness. The mistaken identity of the woman behind the door is highly ironic, as the evil Mrs. Cheveley stands in the place of the idealistic and good Lady Chiltern. Sir Robert's discovery of Mrs. Cheveley furthers the plot and adds yet another complication to the problems Lord Goring must solve.

When Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring are left alone together, the two are clearly equals. They mirror each other in the quality of dress and presentation, and also in their selfish perspectives. However, Lord Goring, who demonstrates an eagerness to help his friends and right wrongs, proves superior. First, Lord Goring offers Mrs. Cheveley money for Sir Robert's letter, but she scoffs at the proposal. Here, again, money has no real power in social context. Instead of accepting money, Mrs. Cheveley wants to marry Lord Goring in exchange for the letter, claiming he is the only man she ever really loved. In Lord Goring's eyes, Mrs. Cheveley has desecrated the idea of love through this proposal and through trying to kill Lady Chiltern's love for her husband, an act he can never forgive. As such, Lord Goring refuses her offer and therefore removes her bargaining power.

The idea of forgiveness has some emotional pull, even on a character like Mrs. Cheveley, for she feels the need to explain that she went to the Chiltern house to find her lost brooch rather than to reveal Sir Robert's moral faults. As a result, Lord Goring discovers that she stole this brooch from Lady Berkshire, and he suddenly holds all the power in their interaction. The brooch/bracelet is a pivotal object in the play. The diamond snake shape alludes to the evil character of Mrs. Cheveley who is suddenly trapped by it. When placed on her wrist, Mrs. Cheveley cannot escape and her true character is revealed. Clawing at the bracelet, threatened with legal action, and suddenly without any bargaining power, she becomes so angry that she cannot speak, and the monstrous being underneath the guise of her makeup and dress reveals itself. Again, a mask is pulled away and a true identity discovered.

The two letters are also clearly very important objects. Lord Goring succeeds in capturing the letter from Sir Robert to Baron Arnheim, but Mrs. Cheveley succeeds in stealing Lady Chiltern's apparent love letter to Lord Goring. In this act, both letters and the brooch all pass through both Lord Goring's and Mrs. Cheveley's hands. Clearly, the interaction between these two pivotal characters will lead to the play's resolution. At the conclusion of this act, the reader is relieved that Sir Robert's public image is no longer threatened, but wonders at the power and influence of Lady Chiltern's letter to Lord Goring, which has suddenly fallen into the wrong hands.

At the end of the act the stage directions note that Mrs. Cheveley has a look of evil triumph, the second time a look of triumph has graced her face this act (the first when she entered the scene from the drawing room to Lord Goring's surprise). The idea of triumph was introduced at the end of Act I with the tapestry, "Triumph of Love." Mrs. Cheveley's triumph at the end of this act leaves the reader questioning whether in the end, love or evil will win. Currently, it seems evil has the upper hand.

## Act IV

**Summary**

The scene is the same as the opening of Act II. [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105) stands in front of the fireplace in Sir Robert's morning room. Summoned by a bell, the footman enters and tells Lord Goring Mabel has just returned from riding, Lady Chiltern is elsewhere in the house, and [Lord Caversham](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7263) is waiting for him in the library. Lord Caversham enters and asks his son if he has thought about their discussion of marriage. Lord Goring assures his father he has thought of nothing else, but Caversham, sensing his son's sarcasm, says he can never tell when he is being serious. Lord Goring states he can't tell either. Caversham encourages Goring to propose to Mabel, even though he doubts she would ever accept him. Lord Caversham then tells his son about Sir Robert's rousing speech to Parliament denouncing the Argentine Canal scheme, which the newspapers are praising as a turning point in his already excellent career.

Mabel enters and chats with Lord Caversham, ignoring Lord Goring as punishment for standing her up for their riding appointment. Finally, Mabel acknowledges Lord Goring, only to say she will never speak with him again. Pointedly, Mabel asks Lord Caversham if he can make his son behave more appropriately, but he responds by saying he has no influence over his son. Lord Caversham exists, leaving Mabel and Lord Goring to themselves. Mabel says people who fail to keep appointments in the park are horrid, and Lord Goring agrees. However, he tells her she must remain with him, because in her presence he cannot help but feel pleased. He then tells her has something to say and asks her to be serious for once. He declares his love and asks if she can love him in return, thus proposing marriage. Mabel quickly replies that she thinks it silly that he does not know how much she loves him, especially since the rest of London knows it. They kiss, and he tells her he was afraid of being refused.

Lady Chiltern enters and greets the couple before Mabel exits to wait for Lord Goring in the conservatory. Lord Goring tells Lady Chiltern he has obtained the letter from [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107) and burned it, and thus Robert is safe. With great relief, Lady Chiltern tells him how good a friend he has been to them. Lord Goring reveals that Mrs. Cheveley stole the letter Lady Chiltern had sent him and plans to send it to Sir Robert to "reveal" a non-existent affair. Lord Goring wants to tell Sir Robert the entire story to clear everything up, but Lady Chiltern forbids him to. They devise a plan to have Tommy Trafford intercept the letter before it reaches Sir Robert, but as Lord Goring moves to go speak to the secretary, he sees Sir Robert coming up the stairs with the letter in his hand.

Sir Robert enters and makes it clear he believes his wife wrote the letter to him. He shows pure joy that she needs him and wants him. He asks her to verify the truth of the letter, and with the urging of a pointed look from Goring, Lady Chiltern says she does indeed trust him. Lord Goring exits to the conservatory. Lady Chiltern then tells Sir Robert he is safe from the threat of Mrs. Cheveley, and relates how Lord Goring burned the letter. He proclaims how wonderful it is to see this one sin of his youth disappear and asks her if he should retire from public life. She suggests he should, but he fears he will surrender much by retiring. Lady Chiltern argues that rather than losing, he will gain much from this noble decision.

Sir Robert approaches Lord Goring and thanks him profusely for his help. Lord Caversham enters, congratulates Sir Robert on his brilliant speech and "high moral tone", and tells him the Prime Minister is hoping Sir Robert will fill his vacant seat in the cabinet. Sir Robert looks proud and triumphant, but after meeting eyes with his wife, he realizes he cannot take the offer. Sir Robert reveals to Lord Caversham that he plans to retire from public life and therefore must decline the offer. Lord Caversham is shocked and urges Lady Chiltern to convince her husband otherwise. She tells him she agrees with his decision and admires him for it. The two leave together, with Sir Robert looking rather bitter on his way to write his regrets to the Prime Minister.

Lord Caversham calls their behavior idiocy, while his son believes is an example of "high moral tone". Ironically, Caversham claims he does not understand such a "newfangled phrase". Lord Goring persuades his father to go to the conservatory where Mabel is waiting. Lord Caversham exits, and Lady Chiltern enters the room. Lord Goring asks her why she is following Mrs. Cheveley's example in trying to ruin her husband's career potential. At first she does not understand, but Goring explains that Gertrude is driving her husband out of public life by urging him to decline the vacant cabinet seat. He tells her that women are meant to forgive men, not judge them, and that by robbing him of his ambition she will eventually kill his love for her. She responds that Sir Robert wishes to retire from public life, but Lord Goring points out that Sir Robert will do anything to keep Lady Chiltern's love. However, the sacrifice he is about to make is one she should not ask of him. She ponders all that has been said, and finally agrees she has placed him on too high of an altar.

Sir Robert enters and hands Lady Chiltern the letter prepared for the Prime Minister, turning down the cabinet seat. She reads it and then tears it up, repeating much of Lord Goring's words regarding the appropriate roles of men and women, and her refusal to allow him to sacrifice and spoil his life. Gertrude says she can forgive Sir Robert, and that she finally sees that forgiveness is how women help the world.

Sir Robert embraces his wife, and thanks Lord Goring. Lord Goring then asks for his sister Mabel's hand in marriage. Sir Robert quickly changes demeanor, based on his belief that Lord Goring is still involved with Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Chiltern finally reveals to Sir Robert that it was she who Lord Goring expected at his house that night, and that the letter Sir Robert received was originally sent to Lord Goring. Upon understanding the complicated situation, Sir Robert immediately forgives his wife, saying she is the image of all good things. He turns to Lord Goring and consents to him marrying Mabel.

Mabel and Lord Caversham enter, and Lord Caversham is quite surprised at the engagement. He tells his son that he had better make an ideal husband, but Mabel counters she does not need an ideal husband. Rather, she merely wants to be a real wife to him. Lord Caversham agrees there is much common sense in that. He is very happy to hear Sir Robert has agreed to take the cabinet seat, and they all leave to have lunch. Sir Robert hangs back and asks his wife if it is merely pity, instead of love, that she feels for him. She responds that it is all love, and assures him their life together is beginning anew.

**Analysis**

The complex action in this final portion of the play is quite notable. In addition to the confusion surrounding the note Lady Chiltern originally sent to Lord Goring, that Mrs. Cheveley then forwarded in malice to Sir Robert, and that finally unites Sir Robert and Gertrude, there are a variety of stolen conversations and entrances and exits that allow every aspect of the character's lives to find resolution. Clearly, the letter is a very important tool. It represents Lady Chiltern's love for her husband. Originally, she wrote that she needed and wanted Lord Goring, but only so she could speak with him about her troubled marriage, to which she held so dear. Re-sent to Sir Robert, the letter takes on new meaning, and with Lady Chiltern's revelation that she has in fact held her husband on too high of a pedestal, the statements inscribed in it apply directly to him. Thus, the letter seals their renewed love, and represents their bright future together.

The political thread in the play continues in Act IV. Ironically, the newspapers praise Sir Robert for his integrity, as they know nothing of the moral failure that almost caused his downfall. Lord Caversham tells Lord Goring the papers will never say anything like that about him, although in reality, Lord Goring seems to have lived with more integrity that Sir Robert. Lord Goring does not espouse a very high view of the House of Commons, and he certainly wants to avoid any involvement with a political life, yet his somewhat out of touch father and his morally failing friend are steeped in it. Thus, Wilde reveals his cynical views on the subject through Lord Goring, the character that mirrors him most.

In this same vein of public information, it is worth noting the power of the press in the play. Wilde understood the power of newspapers to make or doom a public figure. He promoted his own career through the media, and watched it ruin Parnell, a Scottish politician of the time who found great success and then was brought down through public scandals. One newspaper article brings Sir Robert public glory. Lord Goring, again a voice of Wilde himself, observes the irony, noting he certainly hopes the newspapers never discuss him in such terms. For the first three acts, the media was a threat to Sir Robert, and now it is a boost to his career.

The beginning of Act IV focuses on the separation between public and private information, and again, information is all-powerful. Sir Robert escapes his past because the public has no information about his corruption. Political corruption is only a problem to Sir Robert if it might possibly become known to the world. When he discovers Lord Goring has destroyed the corrupt letter, he rejoices. His own knowledge of his mistake does not haunt him, only the public disgrace it might cause. Even Lady Chiltern softens her staunch moral views after Sir Robert's name is protected from harm. Corruption only gets punished when it becomes a public matter, making political sense not a matter of principles, but rather of gamesmanship. Wilde criticizes the hypocritical society that condones this system of belief.

As Lord Goring refuses a career in politics, he refers to his youth as preventing him from taking on such serious responsibility. Goring sees youth as an art form, one with imperfections, but also breathtaking beauty. Goring wishes to live in a youthful world for as long as possible. In contrast, Sir Robert thinks of his youth as a reminder of his moral corruption and therefore tries to separate himself from it. Throughout the play, it would seem Wilde's perspective aligns more with Goring's, as he likens all the major characters to pieces of art. The small reference to art in this final act suggests that he continues to sculpt the characters throughout, and wants the reader to be aware of this process of creation. In this play, as the artist, Wilde promotes love over all other social forces, such as wealth or social status, as the key ingredient to happiness. In the end, Lord Goring, Mabel, Lady Chiltern, Sir Robert, and even Lord Caversham, are all pleased with the way things have turned out, and as with the opening scene, the tapestry of Boucher's "Triumph of Love" shines brightly in the final moments of the play.

Love and marriage triumph, and the roles of women and men in these aspects of life are defined clearly. Lord Goring fears a sensible wife will reduce him to idiocy very rapidly, but in advocating a sensible wife, Lord Caversham implies that a woman in touch with common social values, such as proper marriage, earns a respectable place in society. Lord Goring appears to take a cynical view of these notions, but also in a serious conversation with Lady Chiltern, argues that it is a woman's place to support her husband and forgive him for his faults. In fact, Lord Goring goes so far as to state a woman's life consists of "curves of emotion" and a man's consists of "lines of intellect". Moreover, he ironically extols the notion of the "ideal" Victorian woman, one who pardons rather than punishes her husband, and he urges Lady Chiltern to avoid following in Mrs. Cheveley's footsteps by trying to block her husband's success. Up to this point in the play, Lord Goring is a voice of moderate reason, but he disappoints the modern reader with this support of classic Victorian womanhood. In Goring's eyes, it appears women are inferior and should play supporting roles in their marriages.

Lady Chiltern originally adheres to the concept of an "ideal," morally perfect husband and marriage. However, her dream is shattered and she comes to terms with the reality of human faults. Interestingly, Lord Goring and Mabel have no foolish ideas about marriage and perfection, and when Lord Caversham offers his hope that his son will be an ideal husband, Mabel counters that she would rather him be a real husband. With this quick acceptance and demonstrated love of each other's faults, the reader clearly sees the mistake in Lady Chiltern's original expectations of perfection. Throughout the play, Mabel and Lord Goring have both vocally objected to the expectations society forces upon them, and balk at the notions of duty and respectability. Thus, their natural ease in entering a happy and tension free marriage seems to connote such disregard for the affectations of proper social behavior. It seems Wilde does not believe in the possibility of perfection, moral or otherwise, and believes those who accept their imperfections and avoid false affectation lead richer and more satisfying lives.

**Major Themes**

**Political Corruption**

Political corruption dominates the plot in *An Ideal Husband*. Sir Robert's flawless career is threatened by the corruption of his youth. One of the play's ironies is that the happy ending relies on Sir Robert's corruption remaining hidden from public view. The offer of a cabinet seat would never stand if the public had knowledge of his past. Yet, because he successfully hides this past, he feels absolved of his crime. Even Lady Chiltern forgives him for it. The reader can also certainly understand the folly of youth and imperfections of humanity, especially in the face of temptation. However, Wilde's play observes the relevant point that the modern political playing ground was emerging into one where corruption often went hand in hand with politics. The morals of many people, and some of the plays major characters, are based more on the fear of public detection and retaining social status than on pure values of right and wrong. He criticizes this society throughout the play.

**Institution of Marriage**

Wilde treats marriage as a complicated and imperfect relationship in his play, and mocks the Chilterns' attempt to create the perfect marriage based on social status. Lady Chiltern constantly states that her husband cannot afford to support the Argentine Canal scheme because he represents the best of English life. Both Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont complain about their marriage because they are too perfect, and are therefore uninteresting. In any marriage, problems arise, but in the best marriages, love remains constant. Lord Goring is the play's champion of love, and his relationship with Mabel allows for imperfections rather than focusing on ideals. Mrs. Cheveley tries to make Lord Goring marry her, but she represents evil and self-interest, and as Lord Goring notes, desecrates the word of love. Thus, he does not even imagine accepting her suggestion, and maintains true to himself and his love. The survival of marriage and the proposal of entering into married union is front and center throughout the plot, and highlights the characters' imperfections.

**The Triumph of Love**

At the very end of Act I, the final scene ends with the great chandelier illuminating the tapestry of the Triumph of Love. This description certainly foreshadows the rest of the play, for in the remaining three acts, love does in fact triumph. Part of the play's final line is "Love, and only love." With the help of Lord Goring, Lady Chiltern learns about the power of love and comes to understand life through the lens of love. Many of the other characters also examine differing ideas of love. Lord Goring speaks of love as the only path to truly understand and living life, and in the end pledges his love to Mabel. Lady Chiltern believes her love is contingent upon her husband's moral perfection, but learns that perfection is impossible, and that love will endure even when flaws are acknowledged. The plot is a battleground between the forces of love versus the forces of evil. In Act III, Mrs. Cheveley, the representation of evil, twice wears a look of triumph. However, despite evil's best efforts, Lady Chiltern finally understands that love is powerful enough to withstand imperfection. Moreover, Sir Robert moves from viewing wealth as all-important to understanding love and his marriage are the most important things in his life. Thus, love, rather than wealth or evil, leads to happiness and triumphs all.

**Modernity**

The characters in the play are highly concerned with the fashions of the day. Lady Markby comments that Mabel is becoming increasingly modern, and warns her of the danger associated with such change, as a tendency towards modernity allows for more rapidly becoming out of date. Likewise, Lady Markby preoccupies herself with the modern infatuation with curates, and notes that the citizens of overpopulated England tend to jostle and scramble a great deal nowadays. Wilde references modernity throughout the play, regardless of topic or scene, and often associates it with unpleasantness. Notably, Sir Robert comments that every modern fortune is built on private information, thus arguing for the necessity of political corruption. Moreover, Lord Goring comments that Mrs. Cheveley is most likely one of those modern women who fancy new scandals. The general fear of modernity suggests a social weakness of an inability to accept change. Most of the play's characters, despite claiming an interest in modern culture, seem to wish for social conformity.

**Forgiveness**

The question of forgiveness runs throughout *An Ideal Husband*. As Sir Robert angrily tells his wife that she has placed him up on a monstrous pedestal, he tells her that it is when men are wounded that they are most in need of love and forgiveness. As he puts it, love forgives. Much like the question, "Are you a pessimist or an optimist?" the decision to forgive determines the quality of the characters' moral fortitude. Mrs. Cheveley stands as the one character beyond forgiveness. In Act III, Lord Goring explains that Mrs. Cheveley's attempt to kill Lady Chiltern's love for her husband is an unforgivable act. However, when Sir Robert appears at Lord Goring's house in desperate need of advice, believing he has killed his wife's love for him, Lord Goring maintains that she will forgive him. Lord Goring understands that the act of forgiveness is a crucial part of marriage, and through it we acknowledge universal human imperfection. Therefore, love and forgiveness are inseparable throughout the play. When love is present, there is the possibility of forgiveness. Human imperfection inherently requires love and forgiveness from others.

**The Past**

The past constantly remains in the characters' consciousness, and thus also in the reader's. In the first act, Mrs. Cheveley tells Sir Robert that he cannot buy back his past; he must face his mistakes. Similarly, Lady Chiltern defines Mrs. Cheveley by the dishonesty she exhibited and thefts she committed during her schooldays. In fact, Lady Chiltern believes the past defines a person, and reveals true character. Mrs. Cheveley's past finally catches up with her as well, when Lord Goring finds the piece of jewelry she stole from Lady Berkshire. It ruins her plan to blackmail Sir Robert, and leaves her helpless against Lord Goring's demands. Even Lord Goring's past briefly haunts him. Many years previous he was briefly engaged to Mrs. Cheveley. Sir Robert discovers the woman in his house, and afterwards refuses Lord Goring his sister Mabel's hand. Fortunately, Lord Goring and Lady Chiltern explain the events of that evening and Sir Robert blesses the marriage. Lord Caversham, Lord Goring's father and a figure of the past, constantly compares modern day society with his own generation, which leaves him wondering at the state of his country. The past looms large for all the characters and profoundly affects their present lives.

**The Role of Women in Society**

Much of the play provides commentary on the role of women in society. Sir Robert asks Mrs. Cheveley if she thinks science can grapple with the problem of women, which sets up the play's suggestion that women are highly complex. In the final act, Lord Goring gives a speech to Lady Chiltern about the role of women in society and in marriage, stressing the importance of supporting a husband in pursuing what he loves rather than stifling his desires. She takes his advice to heart and urges her husband to continue his public service. Lord Goring often draws a clear distinction between the role of men and women in society and in marriage. In Act III, he thinks to himself that all women should stand by their husbands. Lord Caversham suggests that only men, and not women, are endowed with common sense.

Although many of the male characters have problems with the women, many women have problems with the men. Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont are miserable with their husbands, and fed up with their perfection. Mrs. Markby and Mrs. Cheveley believe that men need education, but doubt their capacity to develop. Lady Markby and Lady Basildon, and Mrs. Marchmont also comment on the role of women. Lady Markby talks about modern women, deriding their higher education, a topic that Lady Chiltern rigorously defends. She explains that in the past, women were taught not to understand anything, but that the modern woman is far more knowledgeable. Thus, women have a complex role within the play. The coexistence of men and women often seems a constant struggle, but one that is ultimately beneficial to all.

## Social Corruption

In [*An Ideal Husband*](http://www.gradesaver.com/an-ideal-husband/), [Oscar Wilde](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/oscar-wilde/) presents a very critical and cynical view of society. The play's irony relies more on the biting cynicism of political and social corruption than anything else. There are four major institutions the play portrays as corrupt.

**Marriage -**The Chiltern marriage is predicated on Lady Chiltern's belief that Sir Robert must be morally above reproach. Rather than showing concern or sympathy for Sir Robert when he clearly is in great distress after [Mrs. Cheveley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7107)'s visit, Lady Chiltern forces him to remain true to his public image in a way that makes one wonder whether she is trying to protect herself or her husband. Self-interest clearly plays a huge role in the play, and within the sphere of marriage, it threatens the happiness of both the Chilterns. Wilde's language suggests that marriage is a dangerous institution. Mrs. Cheveley comments dryly that the London season is full of those hunting for husbands, or trying to avoid them. The sentiment suggests a type of predatory nature to marriage that contributes to Wilde's already cynical tone.

**Media/Information -** The media holds immense power through the commodity of information, but it does not always give the public all the information it needs. In the first three acts of the play, newspapers represent a threat to Sir Robert's public image and career, for the information Mrs. Cheveley holds would be deadly in the hands of the press. Yet, without ever receiving this information, the newspapers help Sir Robert's career in the final act, praising his speech denouncing the Argentine Canal scheme. Clearly, the newspapers have the power to influence careers of public figures, but rarely is their coverage complete.

**Materialism -** Wilde constantly criticizes the materialistic values of his characters. Sir Robert's corruption is fueled by his desire for money, but as the plot soon reveals, his greed leads him to the brink of scandal and unhappiness. Lady Chiltern's materialistic values are more obscure, but are certainly present in her dedication to Sir Robert's public image. Social status defines her husband, and separates him from the rest of England's politicians. Not until they both embrace love in its truest form does the play reach a happy conclusion.

**Morality -** Most of the characters throughout the play are either morally corrupt or extremely hypocritical. Lady Chiltern's moral corruption lies in the subtle hypocrisy of her actions. She maintains a posture of moral rectitude, but throughout the play has trouble with the concept of forgiveness and what [Lord Goring](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=7105) calls charity. The moral lesson he teaches her prevents the collapse of her marriage, and allows her to find happiness. Mrs. Cheveley represents the most obvious moral corruption, and her constant theft and blackmail speak for her complete lack of moral principle. However, in the end, her lack of morality leaves her with nothing. Sir Robert's lack of morality is demonstrated through his political corruption, but by sticking to his principles and denouncing the canal scheme, regardless of the result, he is finally rewarded. Wilde criticizes these corrupt aspects of society, but also gives directions away from them. The play suggests that love leads to happiness, and the plot seems to reward those characters willing to learn and improve upon their moral imperfections.

**Important Quotations Explained**

### A Note on Aestheticism

### Key Facts

*LORD CAVERSHAM: And if you don't make this lady an ideal husband, I'll cut you off without a shilling.*

*MABEL CHILTERN: An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world.*

*LORD CAVERSHAM: He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be to be oh, a real wife to him.*

*LORD CAVERSHAM: Upon my word, there is a good deal of common sense in that, Lady Chiltern.*

The title phrase, "an ideal husband," appears in the penultimate dialogue of Act IV as the last joke of the play. Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring have just announced their engagement, and Lord Caversham—emblematic of an older generation of London Society—issues the threat quoted above to his dandified son. At the same time, Mabel and Goring have negotiated a union that dispenses with question regarding the ideal behavior of the married couple. As Mabel protests, the "ideal husband" belongs in heaven; Goring can be whatever he wants while she wants to be his *real* wife who decidedly belongs to this world. Indeed, throughout the play they have assumed an amoral pose, disparaging the demands of duty and respectability. Their union thus in a sense counterpoises that of the upright Chilterns, who have just reconciled and are also on the scene.

Humorously, Caversham concurs with his future daughter-in-law. His comment on "common sense" recalls a comic interlude from Act III, in which he identifies common sense as a property of men. Moreover, unbeknownst to him, he has addressed his comment to the character who above all has learned the dangers of attempting to create an ideal spouse, Lady Chiltern.

*There was your mistake. There was your error. The error all women commit. Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what else is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon.*

Sir Robert makes this speech to Lady Chiltern at the end of Act II when Mrs. Cheveley reveals his secret past to the Lady and the latter rejects Sir Robert in horror. It is a melodramatic speech, drawn from the popular stage of Wilde's day; in this sense, it is conventional in both content and style. A key passage in the play's treatment of the theme of marriage, it establishes a difference between masculine love, which allows for or is even predicated on imperfection, and feminine love, which mounts the lover on "monstrous pedestals" for worship. As it is directed toward imperfect—and not ideal—beings, one might consider this masculine form of love as more "human." For Sir Robert, masculine love is love in its proper form, love that can cure the lover's wounds and forgive his sins.

Of course, the play ultimately does not assign this form of love to the man. Sir Robert's speech is less a description of "masculine love" than an injunction to his wife. With the reconciliation of the Chilterns in Act IV, the play will conclude that it is actually the woman's role to forgive and nurture her husband in affairs of love, thus reaffirming a familiar model of Victorian womanhood. As Lord Goring will tell Lady Chiltern in the final moments of the play, "Pardon, not punishment, is [women's] mission." Stylistically, Sir Robert's outburst exemplifies Wilde's use of melodramatic speech, a type of speech that dramatically departs his use of banter and repartee. Note the typical devices: the anaphoric sentence structure ("There was your mistake. There was your error."), antitheses (perfect/imperfect), and exhortations that build from the one previous. Such devices function to increase the pathos of Sir Robert's tirade, showing him overcome with emotion.

Perhaps most important stylistically, however, is the speech's tone. Notably, Sir Robert breaks into more epigrammatic prose in the latter half of the passage ("All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon."). Such epigrams use the same rhetorical structures (reversals, antitheses, etc.) that make up Wildean banter; as a result, one could, for example, imagine these lines being spoken ironically at a dinner party. Sir Robert's desperate tone—and the crisis at hand, of course—completely changes how his speech is received, stirring the spectator with a surfeit of pathos and emotion.

*LORD GORING: You see, Phipps, fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.*

*PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.*

*LORD GORING: Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.*

*PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.*

*LORD GORING: And falsehoods the truths of other people.*

*PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.*

*LORD GORING: Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.*

*PHIPPS: Yes, my lord.*

*LORD GORING: To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance, Phipps.*

One should pause on this apparently frivolous comic interlude at the beginning of Act III as it provides a short manifesto for the dandy-philosopher (even as on principle a dandy never makes his ideas manifest). More precisely, this scene brilliantly dramatizes the dandy's narcissism. It is structured as an exchange between Goring and his butler, in which the former delivers a series of scandalous epigrams while the latter concurs impassively. Spoken by a man in the throes of a lifelong romance with himself, Goring's epigrams convey his egocentrism, reducing the oppositions at hand (fashionable/unfashionable, refined/vulgar, true/false) to one between "other people" and "oneself." Thus the vulgar what others do, the unfashionable what others wear, and the false what others hold true. This exchange artfully reinforces Goring's narcissism with an interlocutor who indifferently responds in the affirmative. Thus the butler serves as a sort of mirror to Goring's Narcissus; as it is certain that his interlocutor will agree with him, Goring is even more "talking to himself" than if in soliloquy.

Goring's narcissism is significant in terms of the mores of his age. As discussed in the Context, the dandy stood in rebellion to the values of the Victorian era, an era defined by a devotion to family life, public and private responsibility, and obedience to law. Dandyism dispensed with these somber duties in the name of individual freedom and a self-centered concern with the frivolous (fashion, style, and so on).

*MRS. CHEVELEY: Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women merely adored.*

*SIR ROBERT: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?*

*MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.*

*SIR ROBERT: And women represent the irrational.*

*MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do.*

This exchange takes place toward the beginning of the dinner party in Act I before Mrs. Cheveley moves to blackmail Sir Robert. As one of the primary themes of the play consists of competing visions of womanliness, it is of interest in that relating aestheticism with a certain conception of femininity.

As discussed in the Context, aestheticism, a doctrine often abbreviated as a philosophy of "art for art's sake," insists on art being judged by the beauty of artifice rather than that of morality or reason. Beauty is irrational and amoral, and the aestheticist who worships beauty indulges in excess and exaggeration to flout his age's standards of respectability (i.e. "proper" thinking, proper aesthetic and moral judgments, etc.).

Typically one imagines the (male) dandy as the epitome of the aestheticist credo: artificial, amoral, and irrational. At the same time, like the dandy, these terms are often associated with the feminine. Here Mrs. Cheveley poses woman as a sort aestheticist art object. Like art, women can only be adored—that is, not analyzed—and herein lies their strength. As objects of admiration, women resist judgment according to rational or moral categories. They embody the irrational (or at least when well-dressed) and are thus powerful, perhaps even dangerous. Mrs. Cheveley herself is of course one of these dangerously well-dressed and irrational women.

If female strength lies in the irrational, one might note that Mrs. Cheveley's wit draws from the irrational as well. In this instance, irrationality inheres primarily in her use of hyperbole and false logic: if men can be analyzed, women can only be adored; science has no future in the world. Such irrational speech is what makes Mrs. Cheveley such a mighty conversational foe, poised to manipulate her interlocutors and misconstrue situations to her own advantage.

*Who on earth writes to him on pink paper? How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of a middle-class romance. Romance should never begin with sentiment. It should begin with science and end with a settlement.*

Mrs. Cheveley exclaims these observations to herself in Act III upon discovering Lady Chiltern's letter among Lord Goring's papers. Thematically, this passage is significant in that it condenses Mrs. Cheveley's philosophy of romance in the cleverly rhyming epigram, the "settlement" substituting for romance's "sentiment". Love is a science and aims toward material gain, subordinate to the gospels of power and wealth—a philosophy that privileges the domination of others over all else—Mrs. Cheveley learned from Baron Arnheim.

The passage is also significant as a commentary on the play itself. As discussed in the Context, *An Ideal Husband* adopts many of the conventions of the Victorian middle-class melodrama—the stolen letter being a foremost example. One might thus consider Mrs. Cheveley's jab at Lady Chiltern as referring to the play reliance on these conventions as well, Wilde mocking his own use of this stock device. Lady Chiltern's note is certainly "pink"—as in embarrassing—in both its melodramatic content ("I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you.") and generic nature even if the spectator sympathizes with her plight.

**An Ideal Husband: Metaphor Analysis**

**The Arts**

 In keeping with Wilde’s idea that life imitates art, rather than the other way around, he makes constant reference to the arts as something superior to life, something worthy of being copied. In his stage directions, for instance, he compares the characters to portraits by painters. Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, for instance, are two pretty society women with a delicacy of manner that the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) would have loved to paint. By evoking Watteau’s Rococo paintings of aristocratic society, Wilde creates an atmosphere of formal manners, extravagant dress, and theatrical poses. Lady Chiltern, on the other hand, has “grave Greek beauty” (p. 1), indicating a more severe character with moral dimension. At the top of the stairs she stands under a French tapestry with a design made by FranÁois Boucher (1703–1770) of “The Triumph of Love” (p. 1). This may be the erotic “Triumph of Venus,” an allegory by Boucher, which serves as a symbol for the moral of this play, for it is love that eventually wins out over society’s harsh moral judgment. The tapestry is the last thing we see as the lights fade in Act I while Gertrude claims she will always love her husband, as long as he remains her ideal.

 Lord Caversham is introduced as like a portrait of Lawrence, and Mabel Chiltern as like a Tanagra statuette. Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830) was a famous portrait painter of royalty and nobility, president of the British Royal Academy. The analogy implies that Lord Caversham is a traditional upper-class lord, very dignified and formal. Mabel, on the other hand is described as “the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type” (p. 3). She is compared to a Tanagra statue, one of the ancient Greek terra cotta figurines that were portraits of real women. This suggests she is real and earthy as opposed to the artificial Watteau women. Mrs. Cheveley is so artificial in her purple dress and diamonds that she “looks like an orchid” (a hot-house flower) and is “A work of art” “showing the influence of too many schools,” a not-so-subtle put-down, implying she is a whore (pp. 4, 5). Sir Robert Chiltern is compared to a portrait by Vandyke (Sir Anthony van Dyck 1599–1641), the Flemish court painter whose realistic portraits of respectable and wealthy patrons suggest Sir Robert’s solid, serious, and practical reputation.

 This comparing of people to famous works of art adds to the feeling of artificiality of English high society. Society is a notorious theatrical production. Mabel actually participates in tableaux or posed scenes as a charity project. Wilde makes all the characters part of posed social tableaux.

**Game or Battle**

 Life is compared to a game or battle. One must know the rules and have skill. Lord Goring, for instance, is described as “play[ing] with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world” (Act I, p. 12). He is self-confident about society because he is aware he is playing a game. His discussion with his butler of how to wear a buttonhole flower in his lapel shows he is up on the latest details, and that no detail is too trivial. When Mrs. Cheveley attempts to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern, she remarks, “This is the game of life as we all have to play it” (Act I, p. 24). She says she will play fairly with him because she has “the winning cards” (Act I, p. 27). She calls politics “a clever game” (Act I, p. 10).

 While Arthur seems to think society is a game that he is good at, his friend Robert thinks of life and politics as war. He tries to explain why he did something dishonorable (selling the Cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim) in his youth. An ambitious man “has to fight his century with its own weapons” (Act II, p. 41). In this case, the weapon was wealth, and he had to cheat to get wealth in order to get power. He claims he will fight Mrs. Cheveley “to the death” and with her own weapons (Act II, p. 49). He tries to spy on her to find her secrets. She calls herself his “enemy” and says she is stronger than he is (Act I, p. 25).

 When Arthur tries to make Gertrude sympathetic to her husband’s fall from grace he explains that in practical life to achieve a goal, a man “has to climb the crag” and if he has to, he will “walk in the mire” (Act II, p. 53). It is a constant battle. Sir Robert feels like he is on a sinking ship in a storm as both his wife and Mrs. Cheveley close in on him (Act II, p. 50). He is a ship without a rudder when he thinks he has lost his wife (Act III, p. 86).

**Disguise**

 Society is like theater where everyone is in costume or disguise. Sir Robert has been put on a pedestal as an ideal husband and statesman. He is unmasked to his wife and friends, if not to the public, as a man with a dishonest past. He accuses women of ruining men by making them into a romantic pattern, “false idols” (Act II, p. 71). He does not want to be her ideal because that is not who he is.

 Lady Markby in her usual flippant but uncanny remarks notes that “everybody turns out to be somebody else” as far as society goes (Act I, p. 7). That is what scandal is, after all. Someone appears to be honest and is revealed as false. The paradox is that in this social game of disguises, everyone is anxious to remain unknown but to unmask the next person.

 Politics is a career of disguises, especially in terms of one’s speeches and political philosophy. When Sir Robert asks Mrs. Cheveley if she is an optimist or pessimist, she says “they are both of them merely poses” (Act I, p. 9). She speaks about how it is necessary in modern times “to pose as a paragon of purity” (Act I, p. 25).

 No one reveals who one is. Even the “Ideal Butler,” Phipps, is described as a Sphinx, “a mask with a manner” (Act III, p. 73). Mrs. Cheveley is disguised as a “Lamia” (Act III, p. 80) or mythical demon woman with a snake form below the waist. She has a diamond snake pin with a ruby eye. Her mask only falls when Arthur threatens to have her arrested.

 Baron Arnheim who seduced Sir Robert into committing a crime when he was only twenty-two, is described as a satanic figure in disguise, of “subtle and refined intellect,” “A man of culture, charm, and distinction” who preached a “philosophy of power” and “gospel of gold” (Act II, pp. 42, 43). The Baron is reminiscent of the libertine Lord Henry Wotton in Wilde’s novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, a seeming friend and admirer who seduces the young Dorian into selling his soul for eternal youth. After the Baron dies, his emissary, Mrs. Cheveley is the Lamia or evil demon sent to collect Sir Robert’s soul.

# Theme Analysis

**1. Truth vs. Lying**

 Is society built on truth and trust as Lady Chiltern asserts in her idealism: “It can never be necessary to do what is not honorable” (Act I, p. 35)? Gertrude claims that her husband has “brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere . . . higher ideals” (Act I, p. 37). Sir Robert admits to his friend Arthur, however, that he is not the ideal husband his wife thinks: “I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth . . . to live the truth” but “The truth has always stifled me” (Act II, p. 51). He claims that his wife’s insistence on his ideal behavior has ruined him by making him have to refuse the blackmail deal of Mrs. Cheveley, thus exposing himself to scandal.

 It is a typical Wilde paradox that leads to the moral conclusion that lying is what makes society run and truth leads to disaster. Sir Robert tries to tell his wife “truth is a very complex thing . . . There are wheels within wheels . . . one has to compromise” (Act I, p. 34). Ironically, Sir Robert tells Arthur that he cannot tell his wife the truth about his past because she is too perfect herself to understand the failings of others. Mrs. Cheveley echoes this paradox by telling Gertrude that there are “chasms” between her and her husband because she is too honest. As his enemy, however, Mrs. Cheveley is closer to him because “like meets with like” (Act II, p. 69). People who lie get along together just fine. They know how to play the game.

 Gertrude is so upset her life is falling to pieces that she actually begs her husband, “Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me!” (Act II, p. 70). Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern demonstrate the basis of society in lies in a lighter more humorous vein, since they consciously lie to one another and expect it in return. Arthur may tell someone he is not at home or swear on his honor nobody is in the other room, but his lies are for the purpose of keeping others happy. He does not seem to believe in absolute truth since some truth is a lie, and some “falsehoods the truths of other people” (Act III, p. 74). Sir Robert tells his wife “public and private life are different things. They have different laws” (Act I, p. 33). He is comfortable with double standards. In the end, Gertrude has to learn to live with the idea that life is not all truth and that it would be a very miserable business if it were.

**2. Forgiveness vs. Moral Judgment**

 Mrs. Cheveley tells Sir Robert that Puritanism has ruined England with “our modern mania for morality” (Act I, p. 25). Wilde here criticizes England for its narrow Puritan ideals of ideal family life and absolute sexual purity set forth by Queen Victoria. This ideal pattern does not make people more virtuous, Wilde points out; it only makes them pretend. And then, as Mrs. Cheveley says, “You all go over like ninepins” with one scandal after the other, since no one can live up to these Puritan ideals (Act I, p. 25). Arthur tells Robert to confess his past to his wife, but Robert is afraid, because Gertrude threatens to withdraw her love if she finds out he is not an ideal husband that she can worship: “when we lose our worship, we lose everything” (Act I, p. 35).

 Sir Robert never seems to be sorry for his mistake of the past, only that it was found out. He claims it is unfair for others to judge him when “each one of them, have worse secrets in their own lives” (Act II, pp. 40, 41). Lord Goring agrees “Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing” (Act II, p. 54). He tells Gertrude “All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity” (Act II, p. 54). He tries to tell her that it is human nature to have some weakness: “perhaps you are a little hard in some of your views on life” (Act II, p. 53).

 Robert echoes this point as he begs Gertrude, “Why can’t you women love us, faults and all?” (Act II, p. 71). He continues, “It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love . . . Love should forgive” (Act II, p. 71). He claims that men are capable of a more human and forgiving love. This is a debatable point since Victorian morality was often hardest on women, often condoning a double sexual standard.

 Mabel turns out to be the most admirable woman in the play, from Wilde’s point of view, since she is witty and not too serious. She says to Arthur: “I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn’t have you part with one of them” (Act I, p. 13). She insists she does not want Arthur to be an ideal husband. The final lesson that Gertrude learns from Lord Goring is that “Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission” (Act IV, p. 119). Gertrude finally lays aside her morality and worship, deciding instead to simply love and accept her husband.

**3. Paying the Piper**

 Mrs. Cheveley announces to Sir Robert that he is in his current powerful position because he cheated early in life: “And now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we all have to pay for what we do” (Act I, p. 26). Like Satan arriving for the sinner’s soul, she announces he is not going to get away with his crime. He ends up agreeing to give her what she wants to avoid a scandal. He will have to commit a second crime to cover up the first one.

 Later in the scene Lady Chiltern warns her husband to stay away from Mrs. Cheveley because in the past “she was untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence on everyone whose trust or friendship she could win” (Act I, p. 33). Defensively, thinking of himself, he says, “No one should be entirely judged by his past” (Act I, p. 33). She disagrees: “One’s past is what one is” (Act I, p. 33).

He tries to explain that life involves compromise when she speaks of principles. Lord Goring tells Sir Robert “Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn’t so, life wouldn’t be worth living” (Act II, p. 40). Robert agrees, admitting it took a lot of courage for him to sell the Cabinet secret to Baron Arnheim. He did it to get power, to get a future in politics. Scandal, however, as Lady Markby excitedly notes, is never far away in society. People are waiting for someone else to fall or make a mistake.

 These prophetic statements about having to pay for the past were written by Wilde just months before he himself was convicted of the felony of homosexuality and sent to prison. Interestingly, in the play, he lets Robert Chiltern get away with his past, while he himself was caught and had to pay the price in real life. Chiltern gets away with his past because Lord Goring blackmails Mrs. Cheveley with her past. This implies no one is without sin.

 The play makes a plea for social tolerance, yet the characters, like Wilde himself, are always playing a dangerous game, testing the boundaries of social sympathy. Just how much can one get away with? One would suppose the Wilde mouthpiece, Lord Goring, with his decadent lifestyle, would be more in danger of public censure than the ideal politician, Sir Robert, whose reputation is sterling. He complains to Arthur, “Is it fair that the folly, the sin of one’s youth . . . should wreck a life like mine?” He had tried to buy off fate, he explains, by giving money to charity and living a blameless life since then. “Life is never fair” Arthur tells Robert when Mrs. Cheveley shows up threatening to reveal his past (Act II, p. 41).

 The play creates sympathy for the poor sinner, Sir Robert, since he is at heart a good man caught in a wicked world. He claims he is not remorseful because he simply played the world’s game. Yet he was always afraid of being caught: “when the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers” (Act II, p. 45). Greek tragedy seems just underneath the skin of this comedy, and if one reads it as a parable of Wilde’s own life, he had to pay for his hubris, even if his character, Sir Robert, got away with his.

# Top Ten Quotes

1. **“Oh, I love London society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics” (Act I, p. 4).**

Wilde’s characters speak in witty epigrams. Mabel Chiltern tells Lord Caversham, who complains about the decline of society, that it is, on the other hand, perfect because of its extremes. The Beautiful Idiots are the fashionable people who do not know anything, and the Brilliant Lunatics are those who have ideas, but in order to have them, they must transgress the norm.

1. **“Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm” (Act I, p. 7).**

Lady Markby, one of the empty-headed elites of London Society, stands for blue blood and custom. She does not like all the earnest reform that politicians like her husband and Sir Robert Chiltern are making on behalf of the commoners.

1. **“If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person” (Act I, p. 15).**

Lord Goring is one of the “brilliant lunatics” who speaks in paradoxes, turning all social values upside down. He tells Lady Basildon that politics is a dangerous waste of time, while one could be living for pleasure instead. This implies that logic and politics are games people play.

1. **“We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh, don’t kill my love for you, don’t kill that!” (Act I, p. 35).**

Gertrude Chiltern puts her husband on a pedestal and wants to worship him as a model. She is afraid when he decides to publicly support the fraudulent Argentine Canal Scheme in order to save his career. She is a rigid and unforgiving moralist.

1. **“I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to” (Act II, p. 44).**

Sir Robert Chiltern explains to Lord Goring that he was not weak when he was young and did wrong; it took courage to give in to the temptation to sell a Cabinet secret in order to gain wealth and success.

1. **“Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern. One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly” (Act II, p. 60).**

Lady Markby speaks an ironic truth. Everyone in society wants to keep up with fashion, but as soon as they embrace some trend, they become outdated and look ridiculous.

1. **“Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike” (Act II, p. 68).**

Mrs. Cheveley announces to Gertrude a philosophy of moral relativism where one chooses one’s moral principles as a weapon against someone else. She is an opportunist and a cynic. She does not believe herself evil but a good businesswoman.

1. **“My dear father, when one pays a visit it is for the purpose of wasting other people’s time, not one’s own” (Act IV, p. 102).**

Lord Caversham accuses his son of paying a visit to the Chilterns out of idleness, but Lord Goring wittily claims he only wants to waste their time, not his own.

1. **“Youth isn’t an affectation. Youth is an art” (Act IV, p. 104).**

Lord Goring makes this quip after Lord Caversham urges his son to marry and be serious, for he is thirty-four and too old to be affecting to be a young man.

1. **“An ideal husband! Oh, I don’t think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world” (Act IV, p. 124).**

Mabel Chiltern claims she does not want Lord Goring to be an ideal husband to her. She represents the sort of accepting and worldly woman he prefers to the coldly idealistic Gertrude Chiltern.

# Essay & Questions

**1. How is the Aesthetic Movement in Art reflected in Wilde’s plays?**

 The Aesthetic Movement in Art in England from about 1868 to 1900 was part of a larger European movement in design style in the late nineteenth century influencing literature, music, interior design, painting, and architecture. It emphasized beauty over function or morality. It was also called Symbolisme in France and the Decadence during the 1890s when Wilde was writing his drawing-room comedies. This movement in art rebelled against earlier Victorian or Romantic ideals. The arts were not for preaching but for providing beauty and sensuous pleasure. It was “art for art’s sake” and nothing more.

 Wilde became involved with these notions while at Oxford, influenced by the art critic Walter Pater. In essays published in 1867 and 1868, Pater (1839–1894) announced his belief that life should be lived intensely in the pursuit of beauty. His Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) was a key text describing the beauties of Renaissance art that needed no didactic purpose. Young men subscribed to the cult of beauty, as Oscar Wilde did, believing that life should imitate art. Wilde was a dandy like his characters, Lord Goring in “An Ideal Husband” and Algernon Moncrieff in “The Importance of Being Earnest.” The aesthete in society, like Lord Goring, insisted on dressing lavishly and pronouncing on the style of parties or art, and making fun of the morally earnest Victorian stuffed shirt. Lord Goring focuses on getting his buttonhole flower just right, for instance. Passions and intensely beautiful sense impressions were the proper stuff of life.

 Wilde had pronounced in his essay, “The Decay of Lying,” that Art reveals “Nature’s lack of design.” Nature is inferior, and it is human imagination that makes something beautiful out of the raw material. Thus, Wilde feels that culture is rightly based on lies: “Lying and poetry are arts.” Unfortunately, nineteenth-century art was either too realistic or moral, showing a great lack of imagination. Imagination and lying are thus synonymous for him, making the liars like Lord Goring the beautiful people. Gertrude’s insistence on her husband telling the dull truth makes her the backward and dangerous one because she does not know how to play the social game, how to forgive and make life beautiful. The insistence on judgment makes everything hard and ugly and after all, social morality is the basis of Mrs. Cheveley being able to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern. Wilde says “Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent.”  Life should be the same.

 Famous aesthetic writers in England were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.  They were influenced by French Symbolists like Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine. Visual artists included the Pre-Raphaelite painters, William Morris, James McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley, and the Impressionist painters. As with Oscar Wilde, the aesthetes often led wild and notorious lives in their rebellious pursuit of what is beautiful rather than what is socially acceptable.

**2. What is the background of Victorian politics when Wilde wrote his play?**

 Wilde’s comedies were written at the end of Queen Victoria’s reign (1837–1901), at the height of the Victorian Empire when Britain was the world’s superpower and greatest industrial nation, ruling over a quarter of the world’s population and land mass. The British were proud of their civilization, and this is mirrored in Sir Robert’s pride in his political position. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was the first World’s Fair showcasing England’s leadership in science and technology. At home, liberal politics led to democratic reforms and voting rights through parliamentary action. In the early part of the era the House of Commons had two primary parties, the Whigs and Tories. The Whigs became the Liberals, and the Tories became the Conservative Party. Victoria reigned for sixty-three years, the longest reign of any British monarch, working successively with Liberal and Conservative Prime Ministers such as the Conservative Benjamin Disraeli and the Liberal William Gladstone. The population more than doubled during her reign.

 Britain’s politics had been dominated by the landowners for centuries, but the Industrial Revolution created a huge shift of the lower classes to the cities, creating a need for political change. The year 1832 marked the passing of the First Reform Act giving the right to vote to the middle classes. Later the vote was extended to the working classes. The House of Commons gained more influence, and Parliamentary seats were redistributed to represent more people. The Cabinet of the Prime Minister was the true seat of governmental power, and this is where Sir Robert had set his career from the first.

 Britain was admired for its ability to legislate democratic reform to enfranchise the lower classes instead of engaging in violent revolution as in France. This topic comes up in the play with Lady Markby speaking to Lady Chiltern about their husbands being members of the House of Commons. Sir Robert is a Liberal and part of the current Liberal Cabinet. Gertrude Chiltern attends the Women’s Liberal Association, doing what she can to support worthy causes. She mentions that she lobbies for regulation of factories and women’s rights. Lady Markby, on the other hand, does not like her husband being a member of the House of Commons that is so busy all the time helping the poor. For one thing, she is an aristocrat very conscious of class and without sympathy for the people.  She is in favor of a bill for “assisted emigration” of the lower classes (Act II, p. 61).

 The general economic policy of the time was laissez-faire and free trade, but there was also a pressure to take care of the poor, especially after the Irish Famine of 1848 wiped out half the population. The Victorians had a sense of progress, of improving society. Lady Chiltern is involved in factory legislation because of the dangers of factory conditions and pervasive child labor. Lady Markby is irritated at the issue of Higher Education for Women, but Lady Chiltern is proud that her husband supports it.

**3. What are the characteristics of the comedy of manners?**

 Literature and theater flourished in the Victorian age. Many new theaters were built and theater schools opened. New democratic liberties led to open discussion of social problems on the stage. The prosperous middle class challenged the old ideas of the waning aristocratic order. Wilde makes comedy out of class warfare, generally focusing on the upper classes, who have taste and money. His comedies are set in aristocratic drawing-rooms.

 The comedy of manners is a genre of play that satirizes the manners of a social class, represented by stock characters such as the fop, the rake, and the bragging soldier. Lord Goring is the fop or dandy, and Gertrude is the nagging wife. Mrs. Cheveley is the femme fatale. The plot often revolves around a scandal or secret, sometimes with hidden identities exposed. The dialogue is witty or bawdy.

 The genre arose from the new comedy of the ancient Greek playwright Menander, imitated by Plautus and Terence, the popular Roman playwrights. These writers were copied in the Renaissance by such authors as Moliere (1622–1673) in “The School for Wives” (1662) and “The Misanthrope” (1666), satires on the ancien regime, the aristocracy of France before the Revolution.

 In England, Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing”(1599) could be considered a comedy of manners. Ben Jonson’s comedy of humours such as “Every Man in His Humour” (1598) made fun of the obsessions of certain character types. The genre really came of age during the English Restoration Comedy (1660–1710) with such plays as William Congreve’s “The Way of the World” (1700). Eighteenth-century comedy like Oliver Goldsmith’s “She Stoops to Conquer” (1773) and Richard Sheridan’s “The School for Scandal” (1777) further laid the tradition for Oscar Wilde’s drawing-room comedies of the 1890s. He inherited from these playwrights the witty dialogue and the artificial and elaborate plot twists with secrets, and characters sneaking in and out of doors, overhearing conversations.

 The comedy of manners was represented in the twentieth century by the plays of Noel Coward (“Hay Fever,” 1925) and Somerset Maugham (“The Constant Wife,” 1951).

**4. What other Victorian authors were influential when Wilde was writing?**

 Late Victorian literature was moving away from the early Victorian emphasis on didacticism, sentimentality, and morality, as in the novels of Charles Dickens. One trend was the resurgence of fantasy and fantastic elements as in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (1865) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886). H. G. Wells was one of the founders of the new genre of science fiction with his The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898). In the dystopian novel, Erewhon (1872) Samuel Butler criticized the restrictive morals of the time.

 There was more emphasis on realism in writing as well, especially in depicting social problems and showing the complexity of human life. Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South (1855) dealt realistically with the problems of industrialism, and George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876) dealt with racial questions. Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure (1896) reflected a Darwinian determinism, showing humans as the playthings of forces beyond their control. He treated sex and marriage in such a realistic way that the public was shocked. Another rebellious Victorian novelist was George Gissing who in The Nether World (1889) showed the effects of poverty.

 Joseph Conrad in his 1899 novelette, Heart of Darkness, and Rudyard Kipling in his 1888 short story, “The Man Who Would Be King” brought up the evils of colonialism, though from the white man’s point of view towards other cultures. These authors upheld the idea that the difficult but laudable mission of the British Empire was to civilize the savage races.

 Naturalism became a literary philosophy in Europe and affected the theater. This was the idea that humans were not spiritually superior but just subject to the forces of nature like other animals. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen launched the modern theater with his open discussion of such problems as syphilis and suicide and social ostracism. His “Enemy of the People” (1882) pitted the individual against the social conventions of the community. He influenced the range of topics available in the plays of later playwrights such as Wilde and Shaw.

 While Oscar Wilde was pleasantly shocking the upper classes with his comedies of manners, another playwright, George Bernard Shaw, was shocking English audiences with his “play of ideas,” using the characters and situations on stage as a forum for public discussion. “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” (1893) explored the topic of prostitution and “Major Barbara” (1905) touched on the morality of weapons manufacturing.

**5. How was the position of women changing at the end of the nineteenth century?**

 Women had been excluded from voting in the 1832 Reform Bill. Liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill was elected to Parliament in 1865, however, supporting women’s rights, and slowly, the enfranchisement of women became an accepted idea. Married women only gained the right to own their own property in 1882. Serious organization for women’s suffrage began in England in 1872. Not much progress was made until after World War I when married women over thirty were allowed to vote for members of Parliament in 1918.

 The New Woman was a term used at the end of the century for the feminists who were attempting to live more independent lives, trying to redefine the limited roles of Victorian women who were counseled to be obedient wives and mothers, at home, and out of the public sphere. They wanted education, equal opportunity, and the right to vote. Such young women often did not marry. Some tried careers of teaching and writing and nursing. The New Woman was a subject of plays such as Ibsen’s important work on the subject, “A Doll’s House” (1879), criticizing the polarization of sexual roles. George Gissing’s novel, The Odd Women (1891) deals with a feminist, Rhoda Nunn, who chooses to remain unmarried. Many of George Bernard Shaw’s female characters, like Eliza Doolittle and Major Barbara, are types of the New Woman.

 Though education for girls was compulsory, higher education, when available, was inferior and did not prepare women for careers. Geniuses like Virginia Woolf were denied entrance to Oxford and Cambridge. Women’s colleges in England began to teach more serious subjects by the end of the century, in education and medicine. Women’s political groups, such as the Women’s Liberal Association that Lady Chiltern belongs to, met to discuss and support liberal reform. Lady Chiltern’s group praises Sir Robert as a politician on their side. He is for Higher Education for Women. Lady Markby is old-fashioned and makes fun of the “modern women” who “understand everything” (Act II, p. 63). She mentions that in her time “we were taught not to understand anything” (Act II, p. 62).

 Women like Lady Chiltern who were outspoken for women’s rights or political causes, advising men on issues as Gertrude tries to sway her husband, were thought to be unfeminine and out of their place. The play shows the tension of the changing role of women and the consequent war of the sexes. Mrs. Cheveley says sarcastically, “The higher education of men is what I should like to see” (Act II, p. 62). Gertrude is lectured by both Lord Goring and her husband to be more womanly and soft, accepting her husband’s faults without criticism. They define separate spheres for men and women. While Wilde’s women break the old stereotypes of passivity and often take the lead in courtship and discussion, Wilde still seems uncomfortable with a character like Gertrude Chiltern who tries to be the intellectual and moral equal of a man.

**Themes**

**Marriage**

As the title might suggest, *An Ideal Husband*'s primary theme is marriage, a common premise for the potboiler melodramas of Wilde's day. To recall our discussion of the play's Context, the Victorian popular theater provided stock storylines of domestic life that, after various crises, would culminate in the reaffirmation of familiar themes: loyalty, sacrifice, undying love, forgiveness, devotion, and onward. More often than not, this reaffirmation also involved the re-establishment of the conjugal household.

Though *An Ideal Husband* adopts these motifs, it also mocks, parodies, and ironizes them with its more decadent and dandified characters. Thus we can organize the play's treatment of marriage according to the "poles" these characters might represent.

Lady Chiltern, for example, would predicate marital life on worship, posing her husband as a pristine ideal in both public and private life. Notably this love is explicitly gendered as "feminine." As the play progresses, Lady Chiltern's love comes to appear unreasonable and—once Sir Robert's secret sin is revealed—dangerous to the health of the domestic household. This opinion emerges most explicitly from Sir Robert and Lord Goring, who offer a competing model of marital love that the two identify as "masculine." If a woman loves in the worship of an impossible ideal, a man loves his partner for its human imperfections; his love includes charity and forgiveness whereas the woman's does not.

Thus the play calls for the tempering of the woman's overly idealizing and morally rigid love for one that can pardon human fault. Somewhat paradoxically (but all too unexpectedly), it will ultimately assign the role of pardoner to the woman; as Lord Goring tells Lady Chiltern in Act IV, "Pardon, not punishment, is [women's] mission" in love. Thus the play, miming a conventional narrative arc of the Victorian popular theater, in some sense ruins the ideal husband only to win his forgiveness from his virtuous wife. Re-establishing the conjugal household, this resolution numbers among the more sentimental and conservative of Wilde's day. Obviously, its gender politics are unfortunate to say the least.

The main obstacle to this reconciliation of married life, Mrs. Cheveley, the play's villainness, would subordinate and reduce to marriage to mercenary transactions. Schooled in Baron Arnheim's gospels of power and wealth—gospels that privilege the domination of others over all else—she has no qualms blackmailing Sir Robert and potentially destroying his conjugal bliss to secure her financial investments. Moreover, we come to learn that she engineered a false courtship with Lord Goring in their youth to swindle him out of a settlement. Finally, she will offer to exchange her evidence against Sir Robert for Goring's hand in marriage; Goring will then roundly condemn her for defiling the ideas of love detailed above. With these offenses in mind, Mrs. Cheveley's ultimate capture by a stolen wedding present—the diamond brooch—would revenge her crimes against marriage.

In contrast to both the Chilterns and Mrs. Cheveley, however, the play features a number of characters and conversations—especially those involving "banter" and other apparently frivolous speech—that mock its more conventional thematics. In particular, Goring and Mabel Chiltern function as foils to the upstanding Chilterns. Throughout the play the pair assume an amoral pose, disparaging the demands of duty and ironizing social convention. Notably then do the penultimate lines of the play, spoken by Mabel Chiltern upon accepting Goring's proposal, dispense with the notion of ideal husband altogether. "An ideal husband!" she exclaims. "Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world." Goring is to be what he wants while Mabel would only be a "real wife." In this sense, Mabel and Goring playfully reject the moral thematics described above, unconcerned with the question of what a man and wife should be ideally.

##### **Womanliness and the Feminine**

Though the title invites speculation on the ideal husband, different figures of womanliness appear throughout the play as well. Once again, we will consider this thematic structure by contrasting a few principle characters. *An Ideal Husband* relies on a simple opposition between the virtuous Lady Chiltern and the demonic Mrs. Cheveley, the latter's wit and villainy making her a far more pleasurable character. Lady Chiltern appears as the model Victorian new woman, which Wilde elaborated while editor of the *Women's World* magazine in the late 1880s: morally upstanding, highly educated, and actively supportive of her husband's political career. By Act IV, she will also emerge in the role of forgiver and caretaker (again, "Pardon, not punishment, is [women's] mission"), and thus meets the more conventional demands of Victorian womanhood as well. In terms of generational differences, she stands out against the old-fashioned Lady Markby, the embodiment of an older group of society wives.

Lady Chiltern's primary foil, however, is of course the "lamia-like"—that is, half-snake and half-female—Mrs. Cheveley. Whereas Lady Chiltern is naïve, candid, and always in earnest, the witty and ambitious Mrs. Cheveley is characterized by a sort of duplicitous femininity. As described in Act I, she is a "horrid," "unnatural," and—as quickly revealed—dangerous combination of genius and beauty. Having revealed her capacity to manipulate in Act I, the play dramatically unmasks her as a monster in Act III. Trapped by Lord Goring, Cheveley dissolves into a "paroxysm of rage, with inarticulate sounds," her loss of speech giving way to an agony of terror that distorts her face. For a moment, a "mask has fallen", and Cheveley is "dreadful to look at." Her veneer of wit and beauty thus give way to the hidden beast.

We should also note that the play relates Mrs. Cheveley's duplicity with the artifices of the dandy, Lord Goring. Like Cheveley, Goring is artificial, amoral, cunning, and irrational, traits associated with the feminine. The two great wits and most flamboyantly dressed characters of the play, Goring and Cheveley are doubles for each other: their face-off is something of a climax. Indeed, Goring is Mrs. Cheveley's only match because he can play her game of wiles, just as the Chilterns are doomed to be her victims in their hapless earnestness. Notably, it also takes little for Sir Robert to conclude that they are co-conspirators.

With these parallels in mind, one might thus note that Goring might share an unnatural or monstrous femininity with Cheveley as well: the dandy is, after all, often considered the paragon of the effeminate male. The important difference, however, lies in Mrs. Cheveley's unmasking. If Mrs. Cheveley's mask is ultimately torn aside—in an echo, perhaps, of *Dorian Gray*—to reveal her cruelty and ambition, Goring largely keeps his on, maintaining his dandified pose for most of the play.

##### Aestheticism and the Art of Living

Comments on what Mrs. Cheveley at one point describes as the "fine art" of living run throughout the play. The dandified Lord Goring of course exemplifies this stylization of life as art, emphasizing the beauty of youth and artifice, the importance of idleness, fashion, and social theatricality, and the ironization of existing social conventions. Once again, we can pose the fine art of living against the somber respectability and moral strictures of the Victorian age.

#### Motifs

##### **The Epigram**

Wilde's plays are often read for their witty epigrams; indeed, these epigrams are what make his plays "subversive." "Wit" is defined here as the quality of speech that consists in apt associations that surprise and delight or the utterance of brilliant things in an amusing fashion; the epigram is a brief, pointed, and often antithetical saying that contains an unexpected change of thought or biting comment.

Delivered in a social intercourse that consists of rapid-fire repartee, the tone of Wilde's epigrams are often "half-serious," playing on the potential for the listener's misunderstanding—for example, taking a phrase literally, too seriously, or not seriously enough. Rhetorically, they tend to involve a combination of devices: the reversal of conventionally paired terms, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and paradox. Take then, for example, Lord Goring's rejoinder to his father, Lord Caversham, when the latter accuses him of talking about nothing: "I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about." At one level, Goring's epigram is clearly sarcastic; at another, it is paradoxical, as in a sense one cannot know anything about nothing. The epigram also shifts between conventionally valorized terms: whereas most people would hope to have something substantive to talk about, Goring loves to talk about nothing.

As one might imagine, the "threat" in these games of rhetoric is the concomitant shift in the values—aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, or otherwise—taken up in conversation. Consequently, the apparently frivolous epigram becomes the primary vehicle by which the play mocks the values and mores of the contemporary popular stage.

##### **The Melodramatic Speech**

In contrast to its witty, epigrammatic banter, *An Ideal Husband* also makes extensive use of the melodramatic speech. Such speeches reflect more conventional dialogue from the Victorian popular stage. Notable examples include Lady Chiltern's plea to Sir Robert at the end of Act I, their confrontation in Act II, and reconciliation in Act IV. These rousing speeches—far longer in length than most of the dialogue—involve innumerable apostrophes ("Oh my love!" and so on), exclamations, and lyrical entreaties. Laden with pathos, they radically transform the tone and mood found in the scenes involving epigrammatic banter, representing moments in which poised and polished characters find themselves overcome with sentiment. If the epigram is the means by which the play subverts thematic conventions, the melodramatic speech tends to reaffirm it, serving as vehicle for the play's pronouncements on love and marital life.

#### Symbols

##### **The Rococo Tapestry**

Act I takes place against the backdrop of a Rococo tapestry, a representation of François Boucher's "Triumph of Love" (1754). The "Triumph" allegorizes the victory of love over power: Venus points to Vulcan's conquered heart, and the god gazes up at her like a love-sick boy.

Though the most obvious reading might consider the tapestry as prefiguring the defeat of Mrs. Cheveley and reconciliation of the play's lovers, the significance of the allegory is not so self-evident. Indeed, it takes on a number of meanings. In the story the tapestry tells, Venus conquers Vulcan only to commit adultery with his brother, Ares. In this sense, Love's triumph is more Mrs. Cheveley's than the Chilterns', the former having similarly betrayed Lord Goring in their youth.

Within the action of the play itself, the tapestry takes center stage, so to speak, at the end of Act I, when the audience has just witnessed an argument that appears to foretell the doom of the Chilterns' marriage. Horrified, Sir Robert sits in the dark, the tapestry left lit by the chandelier. In this case then, the image of Love's victory is ironic as it would seem that intrigue is poised to ruin conjugal bliss.

We can chart one more mention of the Boucher tapestry in Act II. Telling Lady Chiltern of her plans for the day, Mabel will jest about standing on her head while playing tableau in the "[t]riumph of something." This joke perhaps prefigures Mabel's own turning of love upside-down in her rather unconventional courtship with Lord Goring: recall that Goring and Mabel resist notions of love as duty and dispense with the questions of ideal marital life that consume the Chilterns.

##### **The Diamond Brooch**

The play's other notable symbol is Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch. Like the tapestry, it takes on multiple meanings through the course of the play. First, as a diamond snake, it symbolizes the evil woman—a woman who resembles a skin-shedding reptile in her duplicity.

The brooch also functions as an agent of vengeance. Ultimately revealed as a wedding gift Mrs. Cheveley stole in her youth, the brooch returns as evidence of a past crime, entrapping a woman who would manipulate past wrongs to her own advantage and wreck marriages. The "poetic justice" in her arrest is clear.

Finally, one might comment on the "duplicity" of the brooch. As Goring notes, the brooch is nothing less than a "wonderful"—or, in modern parlance, "fabulous"—ornament, a luxurious object that metamorphoses into a trap. As noted above, the dandy operates by trickery and artifice—not force—and always with style. In this sense, the brooch is the only "weapon" one can imagine the dandy putting to use, emblematizing his artfulness and guile.

**Sir Robert Chiltern**

The play's "tragic" hero, Sir Robert Chiltern is an accomplished government official, considered by all as an ideal husband and model politician. As described in the stage notes, Sir Robert has effected a violent separation of thought and emotion in his personality; moreover, he suffers from divided loyalties. Though a portrait of distinction and good breeding, Sir Robert conceals a blemished past. Extremely ambitious, he succumbed to the nefarious advice of his mentor, Baron Arnheim, in his youth, coming to hold power over others as life's primary pleasure and wealth as the age's weapon toward winning it. To some extent, Sir Robert holds wealth and power in similar esteem today. At the same time, Sir Robert has had to conceal his past from his wife in hopes of keeping her love. As detailed below, Lady Chiltern's love is predicated on the worship of his perfect image; so desperate is Sir Robert to remain in her esteem that he will even agree to resign from government in Act IV. Torn between his true and ideal selves, Sir Robert suffers from a nervous temperament throughout the play.

Sir Robert is a fairly static character, undergoing little development and ultimately receiving salvation through the machinations of Lord Goring. He does, however, give way to one major outburst once the balancing act between his secret past and ideal persona becomes untenable. Unmasked by Mrs. Cheveley at the end of Act II, he curses Lady Chiltern's impossibly worshipful love as causing their ruin: in other words, because of her worship he could not descend his pedestal, so to speak, and admit his crimes to her earlier. Sir Robert considers himself a victim of what he identifies as "feminine" adoration. In contrast, he loves in a "masculine" fashion—that he can love his lover's human imperfections and then forgive her faults. Sir Robert thus becomes the vehicle of one of the play's primary pronouncements on the theme of marriage. Like his wife, his is largely a melodramatic voice, the conventional nature of his speech—that is, conventional in terms of the popular Victorian stage—reflecting the conventional nature of its content.

**Lady Gertrude Chiltern**

Lady Chiltern is the play's upright and earnest heroine, embodying the ideal of Victorian new womanhood Wilde elaborated while editor of the *Women's World* magazine in the late 1880s. This new woman was best represented by an educated wife involved in women's issues and supportive of her husband's political career. Lady Chiltern certainly embodied these characteristics, and unlike Sir Robert, Lady Chiltern is not self-divided, but perfectly virtuous. Though a poised, charming, and dignified society wife, Lady Chiltern is naïve when it comes to the machinations around her. In this sense, she is Mrs. Cheveley's ready victim.

Lady Chiltern undergoes a rather simple development through the course of the play, specifically with respect to the theme of marriage and, more precisely, the question of how women should love. Toward the end of Act I, she melodramatically delivers a speech to Sir Robert that introduces the idea of the "ideal husband" and establishes the nature of her love, a love described from the outset as "feminine." As a woman, Lady Chiltern loves in the worship of an ideal mate, a mate who serves as model for both her and society at large. Thus she rejects Sir Robert upon the revelation of his secret past, unable to brook neither his duplicity nor the justification of his dishonesty as necessary compromise.

Ultimately she will learn from her counselor, Lord Goring, that the loving woman should not so much idealize the lover as forgive him his faults. Goring will also teach her that Sir Robert—as a man—lives by his intellect and requires a successful public life. Thus Lady Chiltern will forgo her rigid morals and allow her husband to continue his career despite its ill-gotten beginnings.

**Mrs. Cheveley**

Foil to the earnest Lady Chiltern, Mrs. Cheveley is the play's *femme fatale*: bitingly witty, fabulously well dressed, cruel, ambitious, opportunistic, and, above all, duplicitous. Repeatedly the play describes her as the product of "horrid combinations," evoking her dangerous deceitfulness. Thus Lady Basildon recoils from her "unnatural" union of daytime genius and nighttime beauty; later, Cheveley appears as a "lamia-like" villainess—that is, part woman and part snake. Whereas Lady Chiltern is pure and undivided, Mrs. Cheveley is defined by deception, artifice, and falsehood.

Cheveley returns from Vienna as a sort of ghost from the past, at once an old enemy of Lady Chiltern's from their school days, the traitorous fiancée of the young Lord Goring, and a disciple of the deceased Baron Arnheim, Sir Robert's seductive corrupter. Even more than Sir Robert, she fiercely subscribes to Arnheim's philosophy of power and gospel of wealth, treasuring the domination of others above all. Thus she unscrupulously wreaks havoc in the Chiltern's married life to secure her fortunes and dismisses marriage as a mere transaction. Thus, within the moral scheme of the play, she stands opposed to the sentimental notions of conjugal life embodied by the Chilterns and Lord Goring.

With this in mind, Mrs. Cheveley's undoing in Act III avenges her crimes against the conjugal household. Called to account for a past crime, she finds herself trapped for a stolen wedding gift—the diamond brooch—by her ex-fiancé. The poetic justice in her arrest is clear. Moreover, this undoing also unmasks her as a monster. Once trapped by Lord Goring, Cheveley dissolves into a "paroxysm of rage" her loss of speech giving way to an agony of terror that distorts her face. For a moment, a "mask has fallen," and Cheveley is "dreadful to look at." Her veneer of wit and beauty thus give way to the hidden beast.

**Lord Goring**

Described as the first well-dressed philosopher in history, Goring is the dandified hero of the play and a thinly veiled double for Wilde himself. As the stage notes from Act III indicate, he is in "immediate relation" to modern life, making and mastering it. He thus serves as bearer of Wilde's aestheticist creed stressing amorality, youth, pleasure, distinction, idleness, and onward in rebellion against Victorian ideals. *An Ideal Husband* emphasizes Goring's modernity by posing him in a number of comic dialogues with his father, Lord Caversham—in which the former urges his son to marry and claim responsibility while the latter outwits him with his repartee.

Within the play's moral scheme, Goring delivers a number of the play's more sentimental pronouncements on love and marriage, serving as helpmate to the Chilterns and teacher to the impossibly upright Lady Chiltern in particular. Thus he extols the importance of forgiveness and charity in married life, reconciling the Chilterns' marriage according to new ideals of man and wife. At the same time, however, his own union with Mabel Chiltern is far less conventional, dispensing with the questions of duty, respectability, and the ideal roles of man and wife entirely. Alike in their amoral posture, Goring and Mabel thus stand as foils to the Chilterns and their newly ideal marriage.

**Plot overview**

*An Ideal Husband* opens during a dinner party at the home of Sir Robert Chiltern in London's fashionable Grosvenor Square. Sir Robert, a prestigious member of the House of Commons, and his wife, Lady Gertrude Chiltern, are hosting a gathering that includes his friend Lord Goring, a dandified bachelor and close friend to the Chilterns, his sister Mabel Chiltern, and other genteel guests.

During the party, Mrs. Cheveley, an enemy of Lady Chiltern's from their school days, attempts to blackmail Sir Robert into supporting a fraudulent scheme to build a canal in Argentina. Apparently, Mrs. Cheveley's dead mentor, Baron Arnheim, convinced the young Sir Robert many years ago to sell him a Cabinet secret, a secret that suggested he buy stocks in the Suez Canal three days before the British government announced its purchase. Sir Robert made his fortune with that illicit money, and Mrs. Cheveley has the letter to prove his crime. Fearing both the ruin of career and marriage, Sir Robert submits to her demands.

When Mrs. Cheveley pointedly informs Lady Chiltern of Sir Robert's change of heart regarding the canal scheme, the morally inflexible Lady, unaware of both her husband's past and the blackmail plot, insists that Sir Robert renege on his promise. For Lady Chiltern, their marriage is predicated on her having an "ideal husband"—that is, a model spouse in both private and public life that she can worship: thus Sir Robert must remain unimpeachable in all his decisions. Sir Robert complies with the lady's wishes and apparently seals his doom. Also toward the end of Act I, Mabel and Lord Goring come upon a diamond brooch that Lord Goring gave someone many years ago. Goring takes the brooch and asks that Mabel inform him if anyone comes to retrieve it.

In the second act, which also takes place at Sir Robert's house, Lord Goring urges Sir Robert to fight Mrs. Cheveley and admit his guilt to his wife. He also reveals that he and Mrs. Cheveley were formerly engaged. After finishing his conversation with Sir Robert, Goring engages in flirtatious banter with Mabel. He also takes Lady Chiltern aside and obliquely urges her to be less morally inflexible and more forgiving. Once Goring leaves, Mrs. Cheveley appears, unexpected, in search of a brooch she lost the previous evening. Incensed at Sir Robert's reneging on his promise, she ultimately exposes Sir Robert to his wife once they are both in the room. Unable to accept a Sir Robert now unmasked, Lady Chiltern then denounces her husband and refuses to forgive him.

In the third act, set in Lord Goring's home, Goring receives a pink letter from Lady Chiltern asking for his help, a letter that might be read as a compromising love note. Just as Goring receives this note, however, his father, Lord Caversham, drops in and demands to know when his son will marry. A visit from Sir Robert, who seeks further counsel from Goring, follows. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cheveley arrives unexpectedly and, misrecognized by the butler as the woman Goring awaits, is ushered into Lord Goring's drawing room. While she waits, she finds Lady Chiltern's letter. Ultimately, Sir Robert discovers Mrs. Cheveley in the drawing room and, convinced of an affair between these two former loves, angrily storms out of the house.

When she and Lord Goring confront each other, Mrs. Cheveley makes a proposal: claiming to still love Goring from their early days of courtship, she offers to exchange Sir Robert's letter for her old beau's hand in marriage. Lord Goring declines, accusing her of defiling love by reducing courtship to a vulgar transaction and ruining the Chilterns' marriage. He then springs his trap. Removing the diamond brooch from his desk drawer, he binds it to Cheveley's wrist with a hidden device. Goring then reveals how the item came into her possession: apparently Mrs. Cheveley stole it from his cousin years ago. To avoid arrest, Cheveley must trade the incriminating letter for her release from the bejeweled handcuff. After Goring obtains and burns the letter, however, Mrs. Cheveley steals Lady Chiltern's note from his desk. Vengefully she plans to send it to Sir Robert misconstrued as a love letter addressed to the dandified lord. Mrs. Cheveley exits the house in triumph.

The final act, which returns to Grosvenor Square, resolves the many plot complications sketched above with a decidedly happy ending. Lord Goring proposes to and is accepted by Mabel. Lord Caversham informs his son that Sir Robert has denounced the Argentine canal scheme before the House. Lady Chiltern then appears, and Lord Goring informs her that Sir Robert's letter has been destroyed but that Mrs. Cheveley has stolen her letter and plans to use it to destroy her marriage. At that moment, Sir Robert enters while reading Lady Chiltern's letter, but he has mistaken it for a letter of forgiveness written for him. The two reconcile. The ever-upright Lady Chiltern then attempts to drive Sir Robert to renounce his career in politics, but Lord Goring dissuades her from doing so. When Sir Robert refuses Lord Goring his sister's hand in marriage, still believing he has taken up with Mrs. Cheveley, Lady Chiltern is forced to explain last night's events and the true nature of the letter. Sir Robert relents, and Lord Goring and Mabel are permitted to

Note on asteticism

One cannot read *An Ideal Husband* without reference to the Aesthetic Movement of the "Yellow Nineties," a movement with its roots in dandyism and decadence. The figure of the Dandy dates back to the early nineteenth century and the fashionable English playboy Beau Brummel. Celebrated in several essays by the French poet Baudelaire in the 1860s, the Dandy, a consummate man of fashion, evolved into a figure of exaggeration, moral liberty, and the art of pretense.

Decadence grew out of English imitations of French visions of artistic autonomy. Modeled especially on the ideas of Baudelaire, Decadence emerged in England in the 1860s with the writing of Algernon Swinburne. It flaunted the pursuit of forbidden experiences—from homosexuality to hashish—while asserting the superiority of artifice over nature. One was expected to be irresponsible, witty, artificial, and languorous, while always exhibiting astonishing superiority in style and dress.

As articulated by Wilde, Aestheticism was a rebellion against the somber respectability of Victorian ideals and moral strictures. Art must be loved for its own sake, judged by the beauty of artifice rather than that of morality. As with dandyism and decadence, the Aestheticist movement venerated individual freedom, modernity, and social theatricality.

**key facts -**

**full title** ·  *An Ideal Husband*

**author** · Oscar Wilde

**type of work** · Drama

**genre** · Romantic melodrama; farce; "satire" of popular Victorian society dramas (i.e. the formulaic "well-made play," which emphasized stock characters, situations, and themes emphasizing bourgeois morality)

**language** · English

**time and place written** · Written in 1894 in London; staged immediately prior to Wilde's most successful play, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* in 1895

**date of first publication** · 1895

**publisher** · L. Smithers

**narrator** · None

**climax** ·  *An Ideal Husband* has no clear climax, but relies a series of complications and crises. There are numerous climatic speeches and climatic reversals at the end of each act (i.e. the revelation of Sir Robert's secret, Mrs. Cheveley's theft of Lady Chiltern's letter, etc.). The most climatic confrontation is probably between Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring at the end of Act III

**protagonists** · Sir Robert Chiltern, Lady Chiltern, and Lord Goring

**setting (time)** · 1895; thus, first staged in "the present." The time of the play's action is twenty-four hours.

**setting (place)** · London

**point of view** · Point of view is not located as there is no narrator figure

**falling action** · Falling action comes at the end of Act IV, where Sir Robert accepts his Cabinet post and reconciles with his wife; subsequently, Mabel and Lord Goring announce their engagement

**tense** · The play unfolds in the time of the present

**tone** · Tone is differentiated according to character. For example: Mrs. Cheveley displays an acrid wit; Mabel Chiltern is pert and flirtatious; Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert are prone to moments of high moralistic pathos; Lord Goring is a master of irony, sarcasm, etc

**themes** · The ideal marriage; the ideal woman; Aestheticism and the art of modern living

**motifs** · Wit, irony, paradox, hyperbole; the melodramatic speech

**symbols** · The Rococo tapestry; the diamond brooch

**foreshadowing** · There are two notable examples in terms of plot: the speech by Lady Chiltern at the end of Act I that prefigures Sir Robert's fall and Lord Goring's vague remarks about the diamond bracelet and his past engagement to Mrs. Cheveley in Act II

**Take a short, humorous example of Wildean banter and explain why it is funny. What literary devices (irony, sarcasm, paradox, etc.) make the joke possible? What, if any, is the joke's insight? How might it function in the larger context of the play? If applicable, also consider the use of facial expressions, gestures, stage movement, and so on.**

Joking with Lord Goring and Lady Basildon on the travails of having unendurably faultless husbands, Mrs. Marchmont at one point exclaims: "My poor Olivia! We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it." Lord Goring replies: "I should have thought it was the husbands who were punished."

As with many of Wilde's jokes, Mrs. Marchmont's relies on a scandalous reversal of expectations: the marriage of a perfect husband is less a boon than a bane, the ensuing married life being the wives' punishment. To translate further: the perfect husband may be morally upstanding but is a dreadful bore. The ironical Mrs. Marchmont is only half-serious in tone, but one might take her joke seriously in light of a play that concerns itself with the dangers of the ideal spouse. Thus Mrs. Marchmont's frivolous jest might in a sense "laugh off" the more somber discussions of ideal husband that appear through the play. Ever the wit, Lord Goring matches Mrs. Marchmont by reversing the terms of her lament: the husbands, and not the wives, are the true victims of punishment. These continuous reversals and improvisations define what Wilde describes as the wit's "playing" with the world.

Additional Note: Tellingly, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon will subsequently declare themselves martyrs to their perfect husbands as well. Thus their exchange perhaps mocks Lady Chiltern's impassioned speech and emergence as a martyred wife at the end of the act.

**Discuss how objects in circulation (letters, etc.) function in the play. What might they suggest about characters, plot structure, etc.? What might they symbolize?**

Stolen, mislaid, and misaddressed objects are stock elements of the Victorian popular stage, serving as devices for the complication of plot and development of dramatic irony. Despite the conventional nature of these devices, however, how these objects circulate and what they might symbolize invite further interpretation.

*An Ideal Husband* features three notable objects in circulation, each playing fateful roles in the plot: Sir Robert's letter to Baron Arnheim, Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch, and Lady Chiltern's pink note to Lord Goring. Notably, all at some point pass through the hands of Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring, emphasizing how the two are the central actors of the play. Indeed, all three objects change hands between them at their confrontation in Act III, what one might identify as the play's climax. As the "causes" of complication in the plot, it is fitting that all these objects emerge at the plot's most tense moment.

These objects are also rich in symbolic properties. To elaborate on a few that relate to the primary theme of marriage: the brooch, for example, is an agent of vengeance. A stolen wedding gift deployed by her ex-fiancé, it traps Mrs. Cheveley in blackmail, avenging both her near-destruction of the Chilterns' marriage and betrayal of Lord Goring in their courtship.

If the brooch avenges Mrs. Cheveley's crimes against conjugal life, Lady Chiltern's pink note attests to marriage's restoration. Though written as a plea for help to Lord Goring, Sir Robert mistakes it as being a love letter addressed to him, facilitating his reconciliation with his wife. Tellingly, in the final scene, it serves as a sort of second marriage certificate, Gertrude putting Sir Robert's name down as its addressee.

Compare and contrast the different notions of love proffered by the players, both major and minor. Contextualize these opinions within the larger moral scheme of the play. You may want to isolate two characters or couples for comparison.

One could draw an obvious contrast between the ideas of love presented by Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern and in particular by isolating their confrontation at the end Act II. In this scene, both Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern assume melodramatic voices—their speech suddenly characterized by exclamations, apostrophes, and lyrical entreaties—that mirror the conventional dialogue of the Victorian popular stage. Accordingly, their melodramatic dialogue serves as vehicle for a similarly generic discussion of love that reaffirms the social values of the Victorian stage. Tellingly this discussion describes love in explicitly gendered terms. As a woman, Lady Chiltern loves Sir Robert as an ideal husband, a man worthy of worship for the example he sets privately and publicly. In contrast, Sir Robert describes a masculine love that allows for or is predicated on human imperfection. Human require a love that can cure their wounds and forgive their sins, rather than exalt them as moral exemplum. Once again, in terms of the play's moral thematics, one might group their rousing confrontation with the characters, plotlines, and other elements that mirror the mechanics of the popular theater in contrast with those that might undermine these theatrical conventions.

**Analysis - act 1, part one**

##### Analysis

As discussed in the Context, Wilde's later plays both mirror the conventional themes of the Victorian popular stage—such as loyalty, devotion, undying love, duty, respectability, and so on—and undermine them through their brilliantly choreographed banter. The first half of Act I consists almost entirely of this deceptively frivolous party talk.

Wilde's banter is written in witty, epigrammatic repartee. "Wit" is defined here as the quality of speech that consists in apt associations that surprise and delight; the epigram is a brief, pointed, and often antithetical saying that contains an unexpected change of thought or biting comment. The tone of the epigram is often "half-serious," playing on the potential for misunderstanding. Notably, Act I begins by declaring the absence of any serious purpose in the room; one could say that epigrammatic repartee is speech that refuses to speak seriously. Moreover, as this "half-serious" tone is often ironic, such repartee is often speech that the speaker does not speak in earnest either.

Rhetorically, the epigram is usually dependent on a combination of devices: the play between conventionally paired terms, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and paradox. Take then, for example, Lord Goring's rejoinder to his father, Lord Caversham, when the latter accuses him of talking about nothing: "I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about." At one level, Goring's epigram is sarcastic; at another, it is paradoxical, as one cannot know anything about nothing. The epigram also shifts between conventionally valorized terms: whereas most people would hope to have something substantive to talk about, Goring loves to talk about nothing.

As one might imagine, the "subversive" potential in these conversational games is the concomitant shift in the social values up for discussion. Thus Goring assures Mabel that his bad qualities are quite dreadful: "When I think of them at night, I go to sleep at once." In this example, Goring revises the meaning of "bad," moving from "bad" as in flawed or even reprehensible to "bad" as in boring. In doing so, the question at hand is no longer one of good and bad character traits, but whether a given trait is—to invoke a famous Wildean phrase—charming or tedious.

Wilde's excessively playful repartee is scandalous as it continually undermines the attempt to have a "serious conversation." Moreover, such speech is also scandalous in that it stands to expose the absurdity of a socially conventional statement, flout convention entirely, or reveal a conventional opinion's true meaning. One might translate the case of Goring's retort to Mabel, for example, with the following: why do good and bad character traits matter when what's truly important is whether these traits are entertaining? Or: perhaps when people describe an individual's good or bad traits, they really mean to say whether they find him amusing or dull. As we proceed to the development of the play's "serious" themes regarding conjugal life, duty, respectability, and so on, we must thus always keep the banter that undermines the ideas presented in mind.

Act I opens at a dinner party, and so we might note that repartee is only possible in social intercourse—what one might describe as the social theater. As members of London Society, Wilde's characters are extremely concerned with their "performances" at various gatherings and how they "look" in various social circles. As a result, their speech is very much part of their social personas—what we might call their "masks" or "poses." We will discuss masks (and unmaskings) in more detail as we go on. Mrs. Cheveley introduces the motif of social theatricality here when she declares that what Sir Robert describes as the "fashionable religions" of optimism and pessimism to be "merely poses"; of course, for Mrs. Cheveley, being natural is a pose as well.

Act I involves a number of conversations on gender as well. These conversations are crucial as one of the play's primary themes consists of varying conceptions of womanliness. Of particular note is a conversation between Sir Robert and Mrs. Cheveley that relates aestheticism and a certain vision of femininity. As discussed in the Context, aestheticism, a doctrine often abbreviated as a philosophy of "art for art's sake," insists on art being judged by the beauty of artifice rather than that of morality or reason. Beauty is irrational, artificial, amoral, terms conventionally associated with the feminine. Here Mrs. Cheveley poses woman as a sort aestheticist art object. She tells Sir Robert that while men can be analyzed, women are to be merely adored: herein lies their strength. Like art, they resist judgment according to rational or moral categories. They embody the irrational (or at least when well-dressed), and are thus powerful, perhaps even dangerous. Mrs. Cheveley herself is one of these dangerously well-dressed and irrational women

The second half of Act I introduces the play's primary theme—that of marriage—distributing a number of commentaries on married life among its various characters. We will begin with its heroes: the Chilterns.

This section of Act I drastically shifts the tone of the play, moving from the banter of the dinner party to the Chilterns' maudlin confrontation. While the transition from dinner party is gradual, the encounter between the Chilterns' is ultimately so different—in both length and style—from the dialogue thus far as to constitute a new melodramatic "mode" on stage. Note the devices that make up their exchange: Lady Chiltern's lyrical entreaty to her ideal husband ("Oh! Be that ideal still"), Sir Robert's near-confession when Lady Chiltern implores the latter to reveal any past disgraces, the dramatic irony produced when she declares the past the means by which one judges others, and the apparent doom foretold when Lady Chiltern sorrowfully declares that she and a husband who had deceived her would necessarily drift apart. These devices serve to raise the suspense and tension of the exchange; from a party of clever and ironic wits we have moved to an intimate scene between two characters overcome with emotion. Unlike Wilde's inimitable banter, this dialogue directly borrows from the conventions of the Victorian popular stage.

Thematically this exchange addresses ideals of marriage, love, and morality, introducing the notion of the ideal husband. Here the conventionally melodramatic dialogue serves as vehicle for a similarly generic discussion of love. Tellingly, this discussion describes love in explicitly gendered terms. As a woman, Lady Chiltern loves Sir Robert as an ideal husband, a man worthy of worship for the example he sets privately and publicly. As a result, she cannot accept Sir Robert's protestations regarding the need for practical compromises; she will have her ideal spouse or none at all. Sir Robert will confront his wife on the dangers of idealizing one's lover in the following act.

Act I also places a critique of Lady Chiltern's severe sense of morality, however, in the mouth of the villainness, Mrs. Cheveley. Prior to the exchange between the Chilterns, Mrs. Cheveley ventures a biting critique of Victorian society, decrying its "modern mania for morality." Whereas scandals once lent charm to a politician, they now spell his ruin. Ultimately, of course, for Mrs. Cheveley it takes little more to assuage those of rigid morals than a few insipid homilies. As she remarks: "In modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin."

More humorously, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont mock the notion of the ideal husband while bantering with Lord Goring. Bemoaning unendurably ideal husbands as dreadfully dull, they declare themselves "martyrs" of married life. Their conversation thus perhaps ironizes Lady Chiltern's worship of her ideal mate and her imminent martyrdom as a deceived wife.

Finally, we should also note the introduction of two objects on stage: the letter that returns from Sir Robert's past and the diamond bracelet. Such lost, misplaced, and waylaid objects are also familiar devices from the Victorian stage, serving to complicate plot and produce moments of dramatic irony. We will return to these objects in more detail below.

**analysis - act 2**

The first half of Act II is something of an interlude after the climatic conclusion of Act I, providing the background of Sir Robert's secret scandal and introducing Lord Goring into the play's intrigue. Beginning with the story of Sir Robert's "tragic" fall, it presents Sir Robert's views of modern life and poses Lord Goring as a sort of helpmate to the Chilterns: counselor to Sir Robert and teacher to the virtuous Lady Chiltern.

Sir Robert developed his views on modernity while under the tutelage of Baron Arnheim, a mysterious foreign aristocrat perhaps analogous to Lord Henry from *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Notably Sir Robert's corrupter—one he shares with Mrs. Cheveley—is shrouded in erotic connotations (recall Mrs. Cheveley's ambiguous remark to Sir Robert in Act I: "The Baron taught me that among other things"). Indeed, in remembering how the Baron—with a "strange smile on his pale, curved lips"—lead him through his gallery of treasures, Sir Robert describes an enchantment with his old mentor that could be read as an erotically-charged seduction. One wonders what exactly the Baron taught his student. It is not for nothing then that Sir Robert's relations with Arnheim predate his respectable marriage and must remain secret.

Arnheim expounds a "philosophy of power" and "gospel of gold." Though ostentatious with his fortune, the Baron dismisses luxury as mere backdrop: power over others remains the only pleasure worth knowing. Toward these ends, wealth is the weapon of the age and the prime mover of modernity. For Lord Goring, Arnheim's is a "thoroughly shallow creed"—a somewhat paradoxical critique since the dandy would revel in the shallowness of appearances, luxury, and artifice. Perhaps what the dandified Goring criticizes is Arnheim's subordination of luxury and its pleasures to those of domination. To recall our discussion of dandyism from the Context, Arnheim's doctrines are clearly anathema to the dandy's idle and lighthearted lifestyle. If Arnheim would conquer the world, Goring would—as the stage notes from Act I indicate—play with it.

Though ever playful, Goring nevertheless remains passionately loyal to rather sentimental notions like love, pledging to do all he can to assist his friend and sway the morally inflexible Lady Chiltern. As Goring tells Lady Chiltern, love, (and not German philosophy) that "explains" and determines the human world, should trump her obsession with having an ideal husband. More specifically, the love Goring praises to Lady Chiltern emphasizes charity and the forgiveness of faults and errors. Thus in their exchange we see a number of poles emerging around the theme of love and conjugal life, Lady Chiltern's adoration for her ideal mate being posed against the ideas offered by her counselor. As we will see in Act IV, the woman's proper role in love will ultimately become what Goring describes, that of the forgiving caretaker.

Finally, we should note that Goring remains mischievous even in his quite moving gravity, interrupting the dialogue with an occasional joke or repartee. At one point, for example, he declares that truth is a bad habit; after advising Lady Chiltern, perplexed by his sudden seriousness, he denies that he precisely understands what he is talking about. Thus Goring himself would warn his listeners against taking his advice in earnest. His banter continually defuses attempts to engage him in "serious" conversation and provides mild comic relief.

As we are tracing the theme of marriage in this play, we can once again structure our analysis of this act according to the various commentaries on marriage delivered by its different characters. We will begin with the Chilterns.

As in Act I, the playful conversational banter in the second half of Act II ultimately gives way to a confrontation between Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern upon the revelation of latter's secret by Mrs. Cheveley. Once again, their melodramatic dialogue serves as vehicle for a discussion of love that reaffirms the conventional social values of the Victorian stage. This encounter also describes love in gendered terms, and the gender politics of this discussion are unfortunate to say the least.

Recall from Act I that Lady Chiltern loves Sir Robert as an ideal husband, a man worthy of worship for the example he sets privately and publicly. Protesting his rejection by his wife, Sir Robert poses what he identifies as a "masculine" form of love against Lady Chiltern's ostensibly feminine adoration. Man's love allows for or is even predicated on human imperfections. In an unwitting echo of Lord Goring, Sir Robert argues that true love aims to cure the lover's wounds and pardon his sins, not mount the lover on an impossible, indeed "monstrous," pedestal.

Looking toward the play's resolution, however, we might note here that forgiveness will ultimately not appear as a masculine attribute. As we will see, though in this instance the capacity to forgive is associated with the male lover, Sir Robert's speech is less a description of "masculine love" than an injunction to his wife. The play will conclude that it is actually the woman's role to forgive and nurture her husband in affairs of love: as Lord Goring will tell Lady Chiltern in Act IV, "Pardon, not punishment, is [women's] mission." The assignment of this love to the Lady will thus reaffirm a familiar model of Victorian womanhood, one that casts her as healer and caregiver to her husband.

Along with this thematic development, the revelation of Sir Robert's secret speaks to the motif of masks and social theatricality described above. Here, Sir Robert loses his social face—his image as an honorable public figure and husband. Thus Lady Chiltern describes this scene as an unmasking: "Oh, what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible painted mask!" The importance of this confrontation between the Chilterns notwithstanding, a number of more humorous commentaries on marriage run through the second half of the act as well. One might, for example, consider the interlude between Mabel, Lady Chiltern, and her guests. In particular, Mabel makes an especially telling joke regarding a game of tableau—that is, a game in which players re-enact scenes from famous paintings. Informing her sister-in-law of her plans to play tableau at Lady Basildon's, she announces that she will be standing on her head in the "Triumph of something." One can only recall the tapestry—the "Triumph of Love"—that frames Act I. This joke thus perhaps prefigures how Mabel will turn love on its head in her somewhat unconventional union with Lord Goring in Act IV, a union that dispenses with the question of what spouse should be ideally.

Mabel also ridicules courtship and marriage in the caricature of her suitor, the hapless Tommy Trafford, and his innumerable proposals for her hand in marriage. Her mockery of the earnest Trafford not only provides comic relief but, as in the banter from Act I, playfully shifts the conventions by which one would evaluate a potential husband. For example, Mabel complains that Tommy's romantic whispers make him sound like a doctor; his attempts at intimacy only fail to produce some effect on the public. According to this ironic jest then, it is not so much the suitor's sincerity that matters as his sense of publicity. The effect, of course, of this and Mabel's other parodistic remarks is to make Trafford's solemn proposals and courtship rituals absurd.

To take another example: When Lady Chiltern protests that Tommy has a bright future ahead, Mabel declares she could never marry such a man. Such geniuses talk too much and always think of themselves, whereas Mabel requires a husband who will think only of her. Mabel's delightful retort is both irrational ("geniuses always think of themselves") and brazenly unfair: the genius is to be faulted for an egocentrism that prevents him from satisfying Mabel's. Mabel is not looking for an ideal husband; she'd rather have a good admirer. Clearly she pursues romance on terms that diverge sharply from those of the Chilterns.

Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby, and Mrs. Cheveley also converse on married life. Notably, Lady Markby bemoans the talk of government her husband brings home, criticizing the House of Commons as the worst blow to marriage since the Higher Education of Women. Having just come from a meeting of the Women's Liberal Association, Lady Chiltern gently disagrees. She thus comes to embody the model Victorian new woman, a figure of great interest for Wilde during his editorship of *Woman's World* magazine in the late 1880s. Such an ideal wife is both involved in public affairs and particularly "women's issues" and active in her husband's political career. In contrast, Lady Markby appears emblematic of an older and more conservative generation of London Society. We will take up another generational conflict in the following act, in which Lords Goring and Caversham confront each other on the merits of the modern dandified lifestyle.

A final aside on this generational divide: in Act I, Lady Markby makes a number of questionable references to race, stock, and intermixing and, in Act II, jokingly proposes a scheme of "assisted emigration" to rectify overpopulation in London's newly mixed social circles. Her rather questionable sense of humor—distasteful to a contemporary reader—also identifies her with more conservative circles.

**analysis - act 3**

One can divide this part of Act III according to its two major exchanges: one between Lord Goring and his butler Phipps and another with between Goring and his father, Lord Caversham. Both comment on the dandy lifestyle.

The opening exchange Goring and Phipps is a comic interlude, coming on the heels of the wrenching confrontation between the Chilterns. Phipps is described in the stage notes as a "mask with a manner," a man less communicative than the Sphinx. Representing the "dominance of form," such a figure is a familiar comic device, producing a certain "dead-pan" humor that requires such an impenetrable, impassive facade. The scene is structured by an exchange between Goring's pronouncements and Phipps' repeated response in the affirmative.

Goring's epigrams concern the "lifelong romance" of narcissism, reducing a number of oppositions (fashionable/unfashionable, refined/vulgar, true/false) to one between "other people" and "oneself." Thus the vulgar is what others do, the unfashionable what others wear, and the false what others hold true. This exchange artfully reinforces Goring's narcissism with an interlocutor who responds with an indifferent "yes." Thus the butler serves as a sort of mirror to Goring's narcissism; as it is certain that his interlocutor will agree with him, Goring is even more "talking to himself" than if in soliloquy.

Goring's narcissism is significant in terms of the mores of his age. As discussed in the Context, the dandy stands in rebellion to the values of the Victorian era, an era defined by a devotion to family life, public and private responsibility, and obedience to law. Dandyism dispensed with these duties in the name of individual freedom and a self-centered concern with the frivolous (fashion, style, and so on).

At the same time, Phipps reflects his master imperfectly. Not only does he fail to notice his lord's dress, he also gets the last laugh of the scene at Goring's expense, remarking stoically that the lower classes are "extremely fortunate" in losing their familial relations. Phipps's joke introduces the second exchange of this scene: a confrontation between father and son over the latter's bachelorhood and irresponsible way of life. The exchange between Goring and Caversham reveals the dandy in vexed relationship with the figure of paternal authority, particularly when the latter would correct the dandy's behavior. As Goring remarks in the following act, fathers should be neither seen nor heard in family life (mothers, on the other hand, are "darlings").

As Goring is a figure of the new—presented in the stage notes as a man in "immediate relation" to modernity, making and mastering it—and Caversham the emblem of a generation past, their meeting represents a clash between modern and past lifestyles. Mrs. Cheveley's remarks from Act II have prefigured this showdown long before—namely, that nowadays fathers have much to learn from their sons with regards to the art of living, the only fine art modern times have produced.

For Wilde, the modern lifestyle is precisely that of the dandy, eschewing duty and respectability for the pursuit of pleasure, beauty, pretence, wit, idleness, irrationality, and affectation: in short, everything Caversham abhors. In the encounter dramatized here, Caversham assaults Goring with fatherly advice, arguing that he cannot continue living for pleasure and that he should imitate Sir Robert's success: in light of Sir Robert's scandal, the irony of his counsel is not lost on us. In particular, Caversham insists that Goring find a proper marriage—that is, one that considers position and property before sentiment. As with all things for Caversham, it is a matter of "common sense." Obviously Goring cannot comply with his father's wishes.

Underlying this generational clash is also dandyism's veneration of youthfulness as part of modern life. As Goring tells his father when the latter denounces his affectation of youth: "Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art." At the same time, the dandy is also often middle-aged: though he never admits it, Goring himself is in his mid-thirties. To some extent then, Goring appears as the overgrown child in his conversation with his father, refusing to take up the responsibilities of adulthood and living past his time as a young man. One wonders, moreover, if the dandy must always fear the threat of becoming outmoded: as Lady Markby notes earlier, the danger of being too modern lies in growing old-fashioned quite quickly.

Along with these differences in values, what sets father and son apart is a marked difference in their speech, Goring running circles around his father with his wit. Caversham will continually request serious conversation, fall into senile—rather than affected—self-contradictions, and find himself unable to follow Goring's repartee.

For example, at one point Caversham condemns one of Goring's expressions of sympathy, saying there is too much sympathy going on these days. Goring concurs, replying: "If there was less sympathy in the world, there would be less trouble in the world." Thus Goring willfully misapprehends his father's rebuke—that the modern world is overly sentimental—and plays on its literal meaning, taking the vague phrase to one of its ostensibly logical conclusions. The effect is to reveal the absurdity in Caversham's pronouncement.

Caversham, of course does not know how to take his son's reply. Having not gotten the joke but noting the sophistry in his son's logic, Caversham responds: "That is a paradox sir. I hate paradoxes." Of course, Goring's repartee is less an example of paradox than the playful logic of the dandy. Thus son replies with a further set of twists: "So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious." The term "paradox" as a structure of rhetoric now refers to paradox as a description of character. Moreover, being paradoxical—usually connoting obscurity and so on—becomes dull and obvious as an affectation "everyone" has come to adopt. To translate: it is quite boring that everyone you meet has become a paradox. If everyone is a paradox, then everyone is obvious. As with Goring's joke on sympathy, his dizzying repartee is not only surprising and delightful, but perhaps an occasion for insight—in this case on London Society—as well.

Speaking ironically, sarcastically, hyperbolically, or paradoxically, Goring is—as he himself notes in Act II—quintessentially "liable to be misunderstood." Indeed, the capacity to cause and manipulate such moments of confusion is one of Goring's greatest powers. As the stage notes from Act I indicate, Goring is fond of this liability as it gains him "post of vantage" in the social arena; again, through his speech, he "makes and masters" modern social life.

In some sense the play's climatic moment, the face-off between *An Ideal Husband*'s most active characters—Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring—is particularly rich. We will consider it in three parts. Continuing with the theme of marriage, we will first examine Mrs. Cheveley's attitudes toward courtship and conjugal life. Second, we will take up Mrs. Cheveley's unmasking as a "monster" and Goring's relation to the feminine. Finally, we will briefly consider the various objects that change hands in the course of this showdown.

It is in this scene, with her proposal to Goring, that Mrs. Cheveley—to use Lord Goring's term—most explicitly defiles married life. Already we know that she has ruthlessly wreaked havoc in the Chilterns' household; we now learn that she swindled Goring with a false courtship in their youth. Thus Mrs. Cheveley offers a condensed version of her philosophy of marriage in a clever epigram: "Romance should never begin with sentiment. It should begin with science and end with a settlement." Ever the opportunist, Cheveley would thus substitute the "settlement"—that is, financial gain—for romance's "sentiment." Accordingly, she makes her proposal to Goring a vulgar transaction, offering to trade Sir Robert's letter for his hand. At the same time, whether Cheveley truly still loves Goring is unclear: her uncharacteristic pauses after Goring's insults remain ambiguous.

Notably, Act III avenges these crimes against marriage through the diamond brooch. Revealed as a wedding gift Mrs. Cheveley stole in her youth, the brooch returns as evidence of a past crime, entrapping a woman who would manipulate another's past wrongs to her own advantage and ruin his conjugal bliss. The poetic justice in her arrest is clear.

Along with staging this scene of revenge, Act III involves a case of mistaken identity—more precisely, the case of the woman behind the door. Indeed, one of the most ironic events in the act is that the villainness stands in the place of her foil, the consummately virtuous heroine. This confusion of women notwithstanding, however, it is here that the villainess will be definitively unmasked as a monster. Once trapped by Lord Goring, Cheveley dissolves into a "paroxysm of rage, with inarticulate sounds," her loss of speech giving way to an agony of terror that distorts her face. For a moment, a "mask has fallen," and Cheveley is "dreadful to look at." Her veneer of wit and beauty thus give way to a hidden beast.

Mrs. Cheveley's monstrosity is intimately related to what one might describe as her "bad" femininity, the femininity that belongs to the *femme fatale.* Whereas the play's "good woman"—a naive, candid, and earnest Lady Chiltern—embodies the virtues associated with womanliness, the witty and ambitious Mrs. Cheveley is characterized by what are conventionally considered feminine vices. Most notable is her duplicity. Throughout the play, Mrs. Cheveley appears as the product of "horrid combinations" that evoke her dangerous deceitfulness. In Act I, for example, Lady Basildon recoils from Mrs. Cheveley's "unnatural" union of daytime genius and nighttime beauty. Here the stage notes describe her as "lamia-like"—that is, part woman and part snake in her treacherous and deceptive nature. Lord Goring goes so far as to call her womanliness into question, remarking that for a fascinating woman such as her, sex is a challenge, not a defense. Mrs. Cheveley is aggressive and ambitious like a man; her sex is an obstacle to her desires. Horrid and unnatural, she is a monstrous woman.

Mrs. Cheveley's unmasking aside, the face-off between Goring and Cheveley also provides an opportunity to consider how the dandy might be associated with the notions of the feminine described here. Certainly the dandy is a figure of questionable masculinity, indeed often considered the paragon of the effeminate male. Lord Goring is no exception. In the previous section, we quoted Goring as declaring that "mothers are darlings," a remark that aligns him with women in familial life at least. His truer female double, however, is Mrs. Cheveley herself. Like Cheveley, Goring is artificial, amoral, cunning, duplicitous, irrational, and flamboyantly well dressed: all the traits associated with her dangerous and "unnatural" femininity. Goring is Mrs. Cheveley's only match because he can play her game of wiles. In light of Wilde's sodomy trials and interest in the homoerotic, one could speculate on how these motifs of unnatural and monstrous femininity that apply to the dandy might serve as ciphers for male effeminacy, gay or otherwise. As an additional observation in this vein, we might also note how Goring drops his "social face" in the encounter with his enemy. Strangely, at the end of the act, Goring, the consummate dandy-gentleman, will desperately threaten Cheveley with violence when she takes Lady Chiltern's letter. The usually cool Goring loses his sense of decorum, a loss that compromises his manliness even further.

Along with raising these gender issues, Act III also brings together the series of transactions that organize the play, transactions that involve three objects: Sir Robert's letter to Baron Arnheim, Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch, and Lady Chiltern's pink note to Lord Goring. In this scene, all pass through the hands of Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring at some point, once again emphasizing how the two are the play's most pivotal characters and positioning their face-off as the play's climax. As the "causes" of complication in the plot, it is fitting that all these objects emerge at the plot's most tense moment.

The central object of this encounter is of course the brooch/bracelet-turned-handcuff. As a symbol, it suggests numerous interpretations. A diamond snake, it is easily stands in for the evil woman, a skin-shedding villainness defined by duplicity and subterfuge. It is also a fitting weapon for our dandy-hero—that is, a luxury item that relies on guile rather than force and entraps its victim with style. This "wonderful"—or, in modern parlance, "fabulous"—ornament thus emblematizes the artistry and cunning of the dandy as much as it does the evil woman.

**analysis - act 4**

As with the popular domestic comedies upon which *An Ideal Husband* is based, Act IV brings us to a culminating restoration of married life. All is set right: Sir Robert preserves his public image and indeed even advances in his career; the Chilterns' reunite; the young lovers, Goring and Mabel, come together as well. Rather than adhere strictly to a model of rising, climatic, and falling action, the act concludes the play with a series of dizzying complications—a misread note, a complex choreography of entrances, exits, and private conversations, confessions—that only resolve themselves at the very end.

As we recall from Act III, Lady Chiltern naïvely writes her note to Goring as a plea for help: "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." Notably, Mrs. Cheveley mocks this pink note as resembling the start of some "middle class romance," suggesting Wilde's self-irony regarding his use of this stock device. Ultimately it comes to serve as a sort of second marriage certificate, symbolizing, with the inscription of Sir Robert's name, a restoration of the Chilterns' married life. Though Goring jokingly moves to reclaim the letter, it is clearly no longer meant for him. This restoration of the conjugal household occurs on rather conventional moral terms. Once again, the language of melodrama intervenes: there is a profusion of exclamations, sighs, and somewhat trite appeals to faith, love, charity, devotion, and onward as characters succumb to emotion. Lord Goring especially delivers these pronouncements on conjugal bliss. In particular, he makes a rousing speech to Lady Chiltern upon Sir Robert's decision to withdraw from public life that establishes the proper roles of man and woman in married life. We will sketch it briefly here.

First, Goring argues that men and women alike are not worthy of sacrifices as terrible as the one Sir Robert faces. Lady Chiltern cannot allow Sir Robert to resign from public life especially, however, because Sir Robert is a man. Man's life remains of wider scope, deeper issues, and greater ambitions than woman's. Whereas a woman's life revolves in "curves of emotions," man's progresses in "lines of intellect." Consequently, women are not meant to judge men but to forgive them ("Pardon, not punishment, is their mission"). Thus Lady Chiltern must assume the role that defines Victorian womanhood in its most conventional form: that of a forgiving and anodyne caregiver.

Moreover, by demanding that Sir Robert exit public life, Lady Chiltern, according to Lord Goring, "[plays] Mrs. Cheveley's cards"—that is, she plays the part of the villainess rather than that of the heroine. What Goring means precisely by this accusation is somewhat unclear. Is the supposed fault she shares with Mrs. Cheveley is her use of love to bend her husband's will? In any case, Goring's speech leaves the audience with firmly established gender roles in the marital household that, to a contemporary reader especially, are quite disappointing. As noted above, Lady Chiltern will repeat his speech to Sir Robert verbatim, indicating that she has learned her lesson well.

At the same time, as with the entire play, Act IV offers a critique of marriage that undermines this sentimental resolution. More precisely, Goring and Mabel's marriage serves as a sort of foil to the Chilterns'. As Mabel declares in one of the penultimate moments of the play, the "ideal husband" belongs to the next world; in their marriage, Goring can be whatever he wants. She, on the other hand, promises to be a "real wife."

Thus Mabel and Goring negotiate a union that dispenses with question regarding the ideal behavior of the married couple. Indeed, throughout the play they have assumed an amoral pose, disparaging the demands of duty and respectability. Earlier in the act, for example, Mabel remarks to Goring how "on principle," she never does her duty; it always depresses her. She thus teases the lord with what one might describe as a "false paradox"—that is, a statement that is taken or misunderstood as amusingly paradoxical even as the terms involved ("duty" and "principle") are not necessarily contradictory. Read literally, Mabel's witticism suggests that the principles of these lovers demand precisely that they resist the notion of duty. Clearly then does Mabel end up on different footing than her sister-in-law, who has finally come to learn her duties to her husband.

**Marriage Theme**

Marriage was a popular topic for plays in Oscar Wilde's time. It's still popular in ours. Remember all those movies in which a young couple fight and break up, but make up in time for the credits? Same thing here. The characters mill around in a comic fog of misunderstanding and hardheadedness until their need for each other (with a little meddling) overcomes the odds. They learn to be honest, to forgive, to commit, and to give. In *An Ideal Husband*, marriage seems to be a generally desirable institution. Only the villain stays single.

## Questions About Marriage

1. If Oscar Wilde were performing a wedding ceremony, what advice would he give to the newlyweds?
2. Will Lord Goring and Mabel have a happy marriage? On what do you base your answer to this question?
3. What did Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern learn about each other that may make them more compatible?

# Marriage Quotes

*LADY MARKBY. [Genially.] Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable. (1.38)*

Lady Markby introduces the idea of marriage as a fad for young people. The characters have many different understandings of the purpose of marriage.

*Quote #2 MRS. MARCHMONT. [With a sigh.] Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that! (1.165)*

Wilde articulates a central theme even in these lighthearted discussions. She's just being clever, but Mrs. Marchmont foreshadows Lady Chiltern's painful discovery that marrying what you believe is the "perfect" husband will only lead to disappointment.

*Quote #3 LADY CHILTERN. I will love you always, because you will always be worthy of love. (1.390)*

Lady Chiltern traps Sir Robert in her love, which is by no means unconditional. There's almost a latent threat in this line: if you are not worthy of love, I will not love you always. It is clear, however, that she fully expects Sir Robert to live up to her impossible expectations.

*Quote #4 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur, I couldn't tell my wife. […] She would have turned from me in horror . . . in horror and in contempt. (2.3)*

Sir Robert's fear drives him further and further away from the ideal of the honest, forthright husband. He gets to the point where he no longer knows how to be a husband to his wife, ideal or not.

*Quote #5 LADY MARKBY: He always seems to think that he is addressing the House, and consequently whenever he discusses the state of the agricultural labourer, or the Welsh Church, or something quite improper of that kind, I am obliged to send all the servants out of the room. (2.242)*

Lady Markby uses her husband's foibles as conversational fodder and social currency.

*Quote #6 LADY MARKBY: Ah, I forgot, your husband is an exception. Mine is the general rule, and nothing ages a woman so rapidly as having married the general rule. (2.276)*

Most of the women in the play reinforce the image of Sir Robert as the perfect husband. Maybe that pressure makes it harder for Lady Chiltern to accept the truth.

*Quote #7 SIR ROBERT: We have all feet of clay, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. (2.311)*

Sir Robert recognizes his wife as an equal in their "modern" marriage, but still makes big generalizations about the way the sexes love each other. Old-fashioned, maybe, but [*Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*](http://www.amazon.com/Mars-Women-Venus-Communication-Relationships/dp/006016848X) was a bestseller not too long ago. The struggle for each sex to understand the other continues even today.

*Quote #8 LORD GORING: It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution. (3.30)*

Women at this time were getting out more, getting more involved, making their voices heard on a range of political and ethical topics. Lord Goring seems to regret the growing complexity, and eventually chooses a wife who rejects it.

*Quote #9 LORD CAVERSHAM. [Testily.] That is a matter for me, sir. You would probably make a very poor choice. It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life. (3.111)*

Lord Caversham is unnerved by the transition from marriage as an economically driven institution to marriage as a matter of personal preference.

**Compassion and Forgiveness Theme**

marriage can possibly work. In this play, both the men and the women are forever messing up and inadvertently hurting each other. That seems to be inevitable when it comes romantic relationship. What is preventable is the stalemate that happens in the middle of the play, when each side denies the other any communication. According to Lord Goring, husbands and wives need to step back, let go of anger, try to step into the shoes of their spouses, and forgive. And Lord Goring gets the other characters to do just that.

## Questions About Compassion and Forgiveness

1. Does Sir Robert deserve forgiveness? What about Mrs. Cheveley?
2. How much of Lord Goring's gospel of forgiveness is founded on his tendency to behave like a wealthy aristocrat?
3. If Mrs. Cheveley the only character undeserving of compassion, then why do you think this is the case?

# Compassion and Forgiveness Quotes

*Quote #1 MABEL CHILTERN. Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them. (1.131)*

Mabel represents the accepting, indulgent wife, in contrast to Lady Chiltern's demanding and imposing one.

*Quote #2 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. (2.311)*

In a long, melodramatic speech, Sir Robert encourages Lady Chiltern to accept his past mistakes and the possibility of future ones.

*Quote #3 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. (2.311)*

What does Sir Robert mean here? Perhaps that only a loveless gesture – for example Lady Chiltern's emotional abandonment of her husband – can't be forgiven. But Sir Robert stands by his description of masculine love and happily forgives his wife.

*Quote #4 LORD CAVERSHAM. Oh, damn sympathy. There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing going on nowadays. (3.66)*

Lord Caversham stands by an old world, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps ethic that doesn't expect to give or receive help.

*Quote #5 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. She stands apart as good women do - pitiless in her perfection – cold and stern and without mercy. (3.153)*

At this moment in the play, Sir Robert feels so alienated that his wife's "good" nature and "perfection" are enemies almost as formidable as Mrs. Cheveley's wickedness.

*Quote #6 LORD GORING. She loves you, Robert. Why should she not forgive? (3.154)*

For Lord Goring, forgiveness and love belong together. He's a good friend of Lady Chiltern's, but doesn't understand her notion of idealistic love. With his knowledge of his own flaws, maybe he can't imagine anyone loving him if he or she couldn't forgive him.

*Quote #7 LORD CAVERSHAM. He is very heartless, very heartless. (4.66)*

Lord Caversham repeats this phrase several times in the play. He sees only the public Lord Goring – lazy, indifferent, devil-may-care – not the real Lord Goring scrambling to save a marriage and advocating for a reliance on the heart.

*Quote #8 LORD GORING. […] you whose lips desecrated the word love, you to whom the thing is a book closely sealed, went this afternoon to the house of one of the most noble and gentle women in the world to degrade her husband in her eyes, to try and kill her love for him […]That I cannot forgive you. (3.258)*

It's interesting that Lord Goring can't offer Mrs. Cheveley what he so forcefully promotes to Lady Chiltern – forgiveness.

*Quote #9 LORD GORING: Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. (4.236)*

Lord Goring makes this speech after he's become engaged. How much of this is wishful thinking?

*Quote #10 LADY CHILTERN. You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now. (4.248)*

As a modern reader, it's hard to get around the sexist message of the play's end. One other way of looking at it is this: formerly protective of Sir Robert's impermeable public persona, Lady Chiltern sounds like she'll redirect that energy into caring for the man himself, in all his humanity. So part of her transformation is abandoning idol-worship for the difficult, day-to-day work of accepting and loving a real person. And this interpretation is a little more palatable for someone reading *An Ideal Husband* today.

# Politics Theme

Politics serve a number of purposes in *An Ideal Husband*. They start the show with a party, lend weight to the protagonist's crisis, and give occasion for many, many witticisms. The public nature of work in politics gives the protagonist higher stakes. To paraphrase the villainess: scandals don't just hurt a politician, they crush him. Pitted against the equally high-stakes game of love, politics lend an exciting background to this comedy with dashes of potboiler.

## Questions About Politics

1. Are the politicians in *An Ideal Husband* interested in the common good? Or are their efforts focused on raising their status?
2. Do you think that success in public life and happiness in private life mutually exclusive?
3. Why does Lady Chiltern so quickly request that Sir Robert leave public life? Are political success and moral wholeness mutually exclusive?

# Politics Quotes

*#1 LADY MARKBY: Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm. (1.54)*

One of the older characters in the play, Lady Markby's conversation is often a variation on "how things have changed." Here she seems to long for a bygone past when the House of Commons was more ceremonial than effective.

*#2 MRS. CHEVELEY. Politics are my only pleasure. (1.84)*

Laura, Laura, Laura. (That's Mrs. Cheveley's first name.) It's all about her. Politics, sex, friendship all serve one purpose – securing her comfort and security.

***#3 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. A political life is a noble career! (1.85)***

This is early in his conversations with Mrs. Cheveley – before she reminds him of the ignoble moment that bought him this noble political career. One immoral act has enabled him to do a lot of good. The only problem is that she is not willing to forget that original, immoral act.

*#4 MRS. CHEVELEY. Sometimes. And sometimes it is a clever game, Sir Robert. And sometimes it is a great nuisance. (1.86)*

While Sir Robert understands politics as a narrative of progress, Mrs. Cheveley sees it almost like a fickle frenemy, sometimes for her, sometimes against her. She doesn't get this "common good" thing.

*#5 LORD GORING. I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics. (1.159)*

Lord Goring is the original hipster, totally cooler-than-thou. He likes to pretend that political engagement – indeed, caring about anything – is too much for him. But he's also the character who ends up exerting the most influence on others throughout the play.

*Quote #6 LADY BASILDON. I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can't bear listening to them. (1.160)*

For Lady Basildon, politics are useful in social settings. She can show off her learning but she doesn't really have to engage with contrary opinions.

*Quote #7 MRS. CHEVELEY: Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. (1.268)*

Mrs. Cheveley blames Sir Robert's imminent doom on British Puritanism, contrasting it with the looser morals in Vienna. Mrs. Cheveley's willingness to exploit probably gives her more leverage in England than it would on the Continent.

*Quote #8 LORD CAVERSHAM. I wish you would go into Parliament. (4.35)*

Lord Caversham is old-fashioned and idealistic about politics. Political office is about serving the public, yes, but it's also about securing the family name. A career in Parliament might save his son from being such a public embarrassment.

*Quote #9 LORD GORING. My dear father, only people who look dull ever get into the House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there. (4.36)*

For a self-described slacker, Lord Goring is very hard headed about what he does and doesn't want. He is skeptical of the machine of politics of politician's

*Quote #10 LORD CAVERSHAM. You have got what we want so much in political life nowadays - high character, high moral tone, high principles. [To LORD GORING.] Everything that you have not got, sir, and never will have. (4.194)*

One of the funny/sad ironies that keeps popping up is Lord Caversham's total dismissal of his son as a useful human being. In reality, Lord Goring is the play's *most* useful character. His desperate efforts to save a marriage amply demonstrate his character, morality, and principles motives – but he's not going to let us know he's thought that much about it.

# Respect and Reputation Theme

Respect and reputation are extremely important in the polite Victorian society of *An Ideal Husband*. The respect of your peers gets you an invitation to dinner and a potential opening for what it is you *really* want: a promotion, a husband, more invitations to dinner, etc. Decorum is so ingrained in these characters that they can't talk to their friends in front of the butler, and can't order the butler in front of their friends. Characters who flout social norms are punished or woefully misunderstood.

## Questions About Respect and Reputation

1. Would Sir Robert command more respect from the reader/audience if he came clean to the public?
2. How much of Lady Chiltern's interior life does she reveal? At 27 and married for years, could she truly be as idealistic as she says? Is this a badly written character?
3. How does Sir Robert's relationship to his reputation differ from Lord Goring's?

# Respect and Reputation Quotes

*Quote #1 MRS. CHEVELEY. Do you know, I am quite looking forward to meeting your clever husband, Lady Chiltern. […] They actually succeed in spelling his name right in the newspapers. That in itself is fame, on the continent. (1.43)*

Mrs. Cheveley seems to think that any attention is good attention.

*Quote #2 LADY MARKBY. Oh! she goes everywhere there, and has such pleasant scandals about all her friends. (1.60)*

For Lady Markby, scandal is something delicious and exotic – to be kept far away from her, preferably across an ocean.

*Quote #3 MRS CHEVELEY: Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins - one after the other. (1.268)*

Like Lord Goring, Mrs. Cheveley believes that human beings are fundamentally flawed. Unlike him, she uses this knowledge for personal profit.

*Quote #4 MRS CHEVELEY Suppose that when I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and give them this scandal and the proofs of it! Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in*

Even in Oscar Wilde's time, digging up dirt was an important part of journalism. What would happen, though, if news sources weren't allowed to do the kind of investigative reporting that reveals wrongdoing?

*Quote #5 SIR ROBERT. Besides, Gertrude, public and private life are different things. They have different laws, and move on different lines. (1.351)*

This quote reveals that Sir Robert is pragmatic – pretty much a necessity for political success.

*Quote #6 LADY CHILTERN. They should both represent man at his highest. I see no difference between them. (1.352)*

Lady Chiltern is idealistic. This creates some tension for Sir Robert, but perhaps it's useful to have someone with such convictions keeping him honest.

*Quote #7 LADY CHILTERN. I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their lives - men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame - oh! don't tell me you are such as they are! (1.370)*

Lady Chiltern is as self-deluding, as we all are, to some extent. We think: "Oh, that sort of thing happens to other people, but not to *me*." It's clear that she had been thinking this all along, until she was forced to deal with a difficult situation. Experiencing the crisis in her own home humanizes her.

*Quote #8 SIR ROBERT: And now what is there before me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a lonely dishonored life, a lonely dishonored death, it may be, some day? (2.311)*

Sir Robert fears public humiliation almost as much as he fears losing his wife's love.

*Quote #9 LORD CAVERSHAM. [Opens THE TIMES.] 'Sir Robert Chiltern . . . most rising of our young statesmen . . . Brilliant orator . . . Unblemished career . . . Well-known integrity of character . . . Represents what is best in English public life . . . Noble contrast to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians.' (4.31)*

Part of us applauds Sir Robert's narrow escape, part of us wanted him to be caught – and then redeemed.

*Quote #10 SIR ROBERT. Gertrude, Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and sin can never touch you. (4.272)*

Oh dear. This quote occurs at the end of the play. After Sir Robert has twisted Lady Chiltern's arm to accept his imperfection and obvious missteps, he wants her to be the "white image of all good things"? Maybe you should write the sequel: *An Ideal Wife*.

# Morality and Ethics Theme

In *An Ideal Husband*, morality and ethics are inextricably bound to respect and reputation. As most characters shrewdly scale the social skyscraper, ethical behavior is valuable in gaining credibility with others – not necessarily valuable in itself. Good deeds are rewarded with respect and power; bad deeds get you kicked off the island. Those with no part in the rat race are a little freer to define their own ethical code. They may even play with social expectations, doing good while acting badly in order to ease the strictures.

## Questions About Morality and Ethics

1. Who is the most ethical person in the play? Who is the least ethical?
2. Which characters see morality as connected to reputation? Which don't?
3. How do different generations in the play view moral decision-making?

# Morality and Ethics Quotes

*Quote #1 MRS. CHEVELEY. I have a distinct recollection of Lady Chiltern always getting the good conduct prize! (1.66)*

Mrs. Cheveley thinks that ethics are just obedience.

*Quote #2 MRS. CHEVELEY. [In her most nonchalant manner.] My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. (1.252)*

Mrs. Cheveley is saying that a man of the world recognizes that principles bow before needs (i.e., he'll do what it takes to get what he wants politically). Sir Robert has accepted that law before, and Mrs. Cheveley expects he'll do so again. Like Lady Chiltern, she doesn't believe people change.

*Quote #3 LADY MARKBY. Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles, I am glad to say. I am a little too old now, myself, to trouble about setting a good example, but I always admire people who do. (1.290)*

It's funny how Lady Markby equates holding the highest principles with setting a good example. For her, if a tree falls in the forest and no one can hear it, it *doesn't* make a sound. In other words, morals only matter if other people can see you upholding them.

*Quote #4 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [Sitting down.] Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise. Every one does. (1.359)*

Sir Robert feels the need to school his wife on the realities of politics…but he doesn't want to. He sounds a little childish with that last excuse, "Everyone's doing it!"

*Quote #5 LADY CHILTERN. Circumstances should never alter principles! (1.362)*

Lady Chiltern thinks of human behavior as solid and unchanging, impervious to everything around it. Oscar Wilde, history, and psychologists take another view. Procrastination break: google "Situationism."

*Quote #6 LORD GORING. […] in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. (2.58)*

Apparently people had double standards for their politicians even back in Victorian England.

*Quote #7 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth . . . to live the truth. Ah! that is the great thing in life, to live the truth. (2.115)*

Sir Robert is caught between a desire to come clean to his wife and to his public, and a very real understanding of the repercussions of admitting his crimes. No matter how long ago he committed his crimes, the danger of potential damage is real.

*Quote #8 MRS. CHEVELEY Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. (2.289)*

It's interesting how much Mrs. Cheveley sounds like Lord Goring at certain points. No wonder they were into each other at one point. What makes their behavior so different?

*Quote #9 LORD GORING. I don't like principles, father. I prefer prejudices. (4.195)*

In a society as rule-oriented as Victorian England, this kind of statement is pretty radical. Speaking through Lord Goring, Wilde is saying that personal preferences are what matters, not rules.

**Power Theme**

Characters in *An Ideal Husband* have two kinds of power. In a play with a political setting, the first is naturally public power, the ability to make decisions on a grand scale. Speeches made, votes taken, meetings and reports – at this level of government, one man can affect thousands of people. But this one man is at the mercy of the second kind of power, one individual's control over another person. And it's not just the villain he has to fear. All of the characters in this play try controlling each other, whether as blackmailers, tastemakers, armchair judges, or spouses. Even the "good" characters work hard to get what they want.

## Questions About Power

1. Who is the play's most powerful character? What gives him/her power over the other characters?
2. Is any character totally powerless?
3. How does the need for power or control manifest itself in each character? Which tactics are the most successful?

# Power Quotes

*Quote #1 MRS. CHEVELEY. [Leaning back on the sofa and looking at him.] How very disappointing! (1.250)*

The power's in the stage directions. Mrs. Cheveley knows she has the upper hand. She's relaxed. She wants to enjoy the foreplay. Then she'll go for the jugular.

*Quote #2 MRS. CHEVELEY. […] I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. (1.268)*

The tables have turned. Normally Sir Robert uses the power of his good reputation to influence people. Now that reputation leaves him wide open. Mrs. Cheveley has no good reputation to protect and so she pulls out all the stops.

*Quote #3 LADY CHILTERN. It is power to do good that is fine – that, and that only. (1.366)*

Lady Chiltern can't understand Sir Robert's obsession with power, and why the desire for political power would influence him to sacrifice his beliefs. Two very different temperaments meet in this marriage.

*Quote #4 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Youth is the time for success. I couldn't wait. (2.25)*

Sir Robert's lust for power was so great that he effectively said "*carpe diem*" (i.e., "seize the day") when Baron Arnheim made his original offer. This quote typifies the Aesthetic movement's obsession with youth.

*Quote #5 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. With that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvelous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. (2.35)*

Sir Robert describes a seduction that was both sensual and spiritual. Poor guy didn't have a chance.

*Quote #6 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. […] power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, […] and in our century only the rich possessed it. (2.35)*

Sir Robert tries to make Lord Goring understand the desperation that comes with being poor and ambitious. Lord Goring was born wealthy and was never in the position where he had to compromise any principles.

*Quote #7 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the very outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything. (2.37)*

As Sir Robert recalls his misdeed, his condemnation of the act falters. Suddenly, it seems like the right and necessary thing to have done. Because of the impact Sir Robert has made, the Baron actually facilitated a lot of good in the end.

*Quote #8 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. She must have had some curious hold over Baron Arnheim. I wonder what it was.  
LORD GORING. [Smiling.] I wonder. (2.191-192)*

We know what you're thinking: it's about sex. Lord Goring is acknowledging that age-old source of power.

*Quote #9 MRS. CHEVELEY. Call it what you choose. I hold your husband in the hollow of my hand, and if you are wise you will make him do what I tell him. (2.295)*

Mrs. Cheveley delights in having something on Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, Lady Chiltern. Cheveley's lust for power resembles Sir Robert's.

*Quote #10 LORD GORING. Power is his passion. (4.240)*

Have you noticed that most of the quotes on power come from Sir Robert? He uses the word nine times in one scene.

# Memory and the Past Theme

In *An Ideal Husband*, the past is mostly a thing one wishes had never happened. The characters don't want to talk about the past or hear about it. They definitely don't want a letter from it, especially if said letter identifies them as an erstwhile crook. There's some dispute about the past's influence on the future. Does it define these characters? Or can they leave the past behind like a snake shedding an old skin? Ultimately, love buries the old ghosts and banishes the vipers. With the promise of one new marriage and one renewed one, the last act of the play looks resolutely toward the future.

## Questions About Memory and the Past

1. How do physical objects bring the past into the present?
2. Is Sir Robert really as safe as he feels at the end of the play? If another Mrs. Cheveley comes out of the woodwork, with another letter, how might things be different?
3. How do unforeseen consequences of past actions drive the plot of *An Ideal Husband?*

# Memory and the Past Quotes

*Quote #1 MRS. CHEVELEY. Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is. (1.274)*

The past seems like a wholly negative thing. A large part of Sir Robert's past is comprised of the positive decisions he's made. Now, only the mistakes seem important and influential.

*Quote #2 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. No one should be entirely judged by their past. (1.345)*

Sir Robert says this about his nemesis, Mrs. Cheveley. He also seems to be fishing for a gentle response from his wife that might apply to him, too.

*Quote #3 LADY CHILTERN. [Sadly.] One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged. (1.346)*

Sorry, Sir Robert. Lady Chiltern believes that people can't change. She refuses to believe that human beings are works in progress.

*Quote #4 LADY CHILTERN. But you told me yesterday that you had received the report from the Commission, and that it entirely condemned the whole thing. (1.350)*

Lady Chiltern has a memory for even the most recent past, holding Sir Robert to a decision he made yesterday.

*Quote #5 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you might not know. (1.375)*

Sir Robert wishes he could live in the truth. His fear of rejection makes that impossible at the moment. He lies.

*Quote #6 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. […] she looks like a woman with a past, doesn't she? (2.95)*

What exactly does a woman with a past look like? Is it her dress? Her lipstick? Her age?

*Quote #7 LORD GORING. Perhaps Mrs. Cheveley's past is merely a slightly DECOLLETE one, and they are excessively popular nowadays. (2.96)*

Lord Goring reminds Sir Robert that Mrs. Cheveley might not be as susceptible to scandal as he is. As Lady Markby says elsewhere, it probably enhances her charms.

*Quote #8 MRS. CHEVELEY. [With a sneer.] Oh, there is only one real tragedy in a woman's life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband. (3.253)*

This quote is a brainteaser from Mrs. Cheveley. Does she mean that the past is romantic but erratic, the future steadfast but dull? That the best times are behind her? How would you interpret this quote?

*Quote #9 SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I wish I had seen that one sin of my youth burning to ashes. (4.170)*

Sir Robert is referring to the old letter to Baron Arnheim. Would Mrs. Cheveley have been as powerful without this material piece of evidence? There's an interesting contrast between the past that truly existed and the past that's recorded – then later interpreted as reality.

*Quote #10 LORD GORING. Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself? (4.236)*

Lord Goring's understanding of human beings is fundamentally opposed to Lady Chiltern's. He believes a person *becomes*, she thinks a person *is*

**Women and Femininity Theme**

Search "woman" in *An Ideal Husband* and you'll come by lots of zingers. "Women represent the irrational." "Women have a wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious." And can you believe it: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's." What's the deal? Well, in 1890s England, women simply weren't considered men's equals or colleagues in public life. An equal right to vote came in 1928. There are lots of unpleasant words about (and between) women in this play. But take a look at their actions. These women are aware of their power over men and they *use* it, whether for love or hate.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How do women negotiate within their given roles of exerting influence?
2. What do the generational differences of opinion in the play say about women at the turn of the century?
3. How are Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley different models of feminine power?
4. How would women behave differently if the play were set in 21st century United States?

# Women and Femininity Quotes

*Quote #1 LADY BASILDON. What martyrs we are, dear Margaret! MRS. MARCHMONT. [Rising.] And how well it becomes us, Olivia! (1.15-16)*

Their willingness to suffer conversation with boring men makes these women more attractive.

*Quote #2 MRS. CHEVELEY. Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London! (1.70)*

Mrs. Cheveley doesn't have a domestic bone in her body. A steadfast admirer would bore her to death. Maybe that's why she goes after Lord Goring.

*Quote #3 MRS. CHEVELEY. Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. […] Science can never grapple with the irrational. (1.76-78)*

Much of Mrs. Cheveley's power – especially in this early scene – lies in her mystery.

*Quote #4 LORD GORING. [Turning round.] Well, she wore far too much rouge last night, and not quite enough clothes. That is always a sign of despair in a woman. (2.81)*

"Hello kettle? This is pot. You're black." Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley share the award for Most Hours in Front of a Mirror.

*Quote #5 LADY MARKBY. I assure you that the amount of things I and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite extraordinary. But modern women understand everything, I am told. (2.240)*

It's Lady Markby with the how-things-have-changed report. Probably the most interesting aspect of this quote is the idea that "ignorance" can be taught.

*Quote #6 LORD GORING. But women who have common sense are so curiously plain, father, aren't they? (3.114)*

Let's remember that in Lord Goring's world, common sense is not a desirable attribute.

*Quote #7 LORD CAVERSHAM. No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex. (3.115)*

Lord Caversham eats these words later, applauding Mabel's common sense in favoring the "real" over the "ideal" in marriage.

*Quote #8 MRS. CHEVELEY. My dear Arthur, women are never disarmed by compliments. Men always are. That is the difference between the two sexes. (3.243)*

Mrs. Cheveley has full confidence in the superiority and strength of women.

*Quote #9 LORD GORING. How you women war against each other! (3.250)*

Lord Goring sees Mrs. Cheveley and Lady Chiltern as two black widows of very different natures. He couldn't be married to either of them.

*Quote #10 LORD GORING. A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them. (4.246)*

Lord Goring advocates for women to remain in the private sphere as silent supports to their men. Lady Chiltern parrots his speech when her husband comes back in. Some critics see the word-for-word repetition as a comic resolution, but we're not so sure. Can you think of another way to interpret it?

# An Ideal Husband Symbolism, Imagery & Allegory

## Sometimes, there’s more to Lit than meets the eye.

# "Triumph of Love" Tapestry

The Triumph of Love tapestry is from a design by Boucher – perhaps from his "Visit of Venus to Vulcan" (1754), or "Triumph of Venus" (1740). In both, the goddess of love is a triumphant figure – either pointing to the conquered heart of Vulcan or socializing in the ocean with a flock of naked maidens, dudes, and cherubs. The tapestry is highlighted at the end of Act 1, when Sir Robert's just received the directive from Lady Chiltern to reject Mrs. Cheveley's indecent proposal. At this moment in the play, love may triumph, but it's at the expense of all else.  
  
The image appears again in Act 2, as Mabel heads off to a rehearsal of "Triumph of…something" tableaux, just an elaborate excuse for her two suitors, Lord Goring and Tommy Trafford, to vie for her attention.

# Brooch/Bracelet

The snake-shaped diamond brooch/bracelet serves as a symbol of marriage and relationships, though its meanings and uses change throughout the play. It first turns up as a conversation piece between Mabel, who's found it, and Lord Goring, who recognizes it from the past. He makes her promise not to tell anyone he has it – a promise that could be seen as a precursor to their later engagement vows. The brooch emerges as a pretense for Mrs. Cheveley to visit Lady Chiltern and observe the progress of her demolition job on the Chiltern marriage. It finally serves as a trap for Mrs. Cheveley. Her confession of losing it at the party is also a confession of theft, as Lord Goring had given it as a wedding gift long ago. Lord Goring, always resourceful and often secretive, reveals the hidden properties of the bracelet as he cuffs Mrs. Cheveley into submission.

# Analysis: Setting

## Where It All Goes Down

## London around the1890s

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Oscar Wilde set this play in his own time. His many references to particular political situations (the Suez Canal, Women's Liberal Association) made the play up-to-the-minute for his audience. A few years later you would probably have to look up the names to know what Wilde means.  
  
What's important is this: it's turn of the century England; Queen Victoria is on the throne and London is seen as the center of the universe. England is getting rich off its colonies. Power and prestige in London mean international power and prestige. We can see the scope of Sir Robert's influence – and how the focus of his attentions shifts – by looking closely at the settings throughout the play.  
  
We start in fashionable Grosvenor Square at a sparkling party full of international movers and shakers and the women who love them. Chandeliers, tapestry, and chamber music complete the picture. The Chilterns are wealthy and classy. The guests are on their best behavior. (If you want to party like a good Victorian, check out ["Etiquette for the Ballroom," 1880](http://www.victorianweb.org/history/Etiquette.html).) Setting the first scene in such a public arena – even including characters who won't be seen for the next three acts – establishes Sir Robert's reputation and raises the stakes for his struggle.   
  
The settings transition from this public arena to more private ones throughout the play – Sir Robert's morning room and Lord Goring's library. This transition echoes Sir Robert's conflict, and his willingness to sacrifice his career for his wife, if he must.   
  
The morning room is a comfortable room with a fireplace and armchair. It's an appropriate venue for receiving less-intimate friends like Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley. Most of the philosophical debates happen in this room. It's where the hard work of changing minds happens, on the turf of our two serious characters, Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern.

Hard work of another kind happens at Lord Goring's place. Once we see three doors leading into the library, we know we're in for some fun hijinks. A staple of farce, multiple entrances create the kind of misunderstandings and missed connections that keep audiences laughing and plot resolutions up in the air. Once Lord Caversham, Mrs. Cheveley, and Lord Caversham are all tucked into the various pockets of this one small area, Lord Goring is motivated to think fast. He's the kind of guy who does well under pressure.  
  
The last act returns us to Sir Robert's morning room, where everything is tied up in a neat comedic bow. The last moment of the play is its most intimate one. In the same spot where they fought bitterly over Sir Robert's past, he and Lady Chiltern are left alone to reconcile. Gentle with him now, Lady Chiltern remarks that "For both of us a new life is beginning" (4.297).

# Analysis: Genre

## Comedy, Romance, Satire and Parody

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It's the genre that will never die: the romantic comedy. How many romantic comedies hit the movie theaters every year? How many real-life happy endings start as awkward first dates at said romantic comedies?   
  
Wilde comes out with the melodramatic language (See "[Writing Style](http://shmoop.com/literary-device/literature/oscar-wilde/an-ideal-husband/style.html)") to crack open a few heavy ideas about the value of empathy and forgiveness, but let's face it, it's a comedy. And it's a comedy that makes fun of people's faults and bad habits – which makes it a satire. It's filled with fun and zany characters and ends in marriage. And, thanks to Wilde's way with words, it's funny as heck.

# Analysis: Tone

## Take a story's temperature by studying its tone. Is it hopeful? Cynical? Snarky? Playful?

## Light, Satirical, Sympathetic

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OK, so "comedy" covers the "light" description of the tone (see "[Genre](http://shmoop.com/literary-device/literature/oscar-wilde/an-ideal-husband/genre.html)" for more). But how can an author take a simultaneously "satirical" and "sympathetic" view of the story? It's in the presentation of the characters. Wilde paints sympathetic portraits of the main characters, taking pains to describe the reasoning behind their actions. Even Mrs. Cheveley gets somewhat of a pass for growing up poor.  
  
But Wilde also pokes fun at characters, in their own dialogue or in dialogue about them. Satire is all about exaggerating people's flaws to comic effect. Lord Goring is the narcissistic result of the "Boodle's Club" – a gentleman's club in London (1.114). Mrs. Cheveley "really has considerable attractions left," even though, according to Victorian standards, her expiration date is coming up (or past) (3.245). Lady Chiltern is the winner of the "good conduct prize" (1.66). Nobody is safe from Wilde's lampoon

# Analysis: Writing Style

## Witty, Witty, Witty. With a side of melodrama.

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You can always recognize Wilde by his [epigrams](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epigram) – succinct, witty, paradoxical sayings. Like this one (no offense, rock stars): "Musical people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely deaf" (2.191). Fabulous. Even on his deathbed, the Wilde was funny (see "[Trivia](http://shmoop.com/did-you-know/literature/oscar-wilde/an-ideal-husband/brain-snacks.html)").   
  
Most of the characters get to shoot off a few of these epigrams, no matter how they might otherwise seem. How awesome would parties be if everyone were truly this witty. Only ultra-serious Lady Chiltern scores low on the epigram count.  
  
On the melodramatic speech count, however, Lady Chiltern scores high, as does Sir Robert. Lord Goring scores high in both kinds of language. How do we know it's melodrama? Keep an eye out for repetition, reversed word order, and exaggeration. Sir Robert squeezes all three into these words to Lady Chiltern: "All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon" (2.311). He even throws in a little mid-sentence capitalization for emphasis. You go, Sir Rob.

# Analysis: What's Up with the Title?

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An "ideal husband" is what we spend the whole play learning not to want. When we're first introduced to Sir Robert Chiltern, he appears to be just that – a "pattern husband," as Mrs. Markby says. He's powerful, rich, handsome, sensitive, and loving. His wife, Lady Chiltern, worships him. When a secret from his past comes to light, Lady Chiltern judges her husband mercilessly. There's no possibility of compromise or weakness. Her good friend Lord Goring has some advice for her: accept humanity, and stop expecting perfection.  
  
Even the secondary characters have some relationship to the concept of "the ideal husband." The socialites Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont would prefer intrigue and excitement; their husbands are so well behaved they are dull. Man-eater Mrs. Cheveley likes her men with a heaping helping of money – and a good reputation on the side. She unconventionally proposes to Lord Goring, who has no interest in becoming her ideal husband. As a free spirit, he gives no inkling until the final act that he intends to be a husband at all.   
  
Is it possible that any of these pampered, high-maintenance people could ever be satisfied by their husbands or wives? For one thing, they'd miss out on a popular social sport in the world of the play – trashing your spouse in front of your circle of friends.  
  
According to Wilde, the ideal husband (or wife) doesn't exist, and to hold out for one is cruel and pointless. As Mabel says at the end of the play, "Oh, I don't think I should like [an ideal husband]. It sounds like something in the next world" (4.290). She wants to be a "real wife," someone with the natural, spontaneous, indulgent behavior she's shown throughout the play, driven by love of her spouse's talents and forgiveness of his faults.

# Analysis: What's Up with the Ending?

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Like many a comedy before and after it, *An Ideal Husband* ends with marriage. The pleasant, friendly world that was overturned by (perpetually single) Mrs. Cheveley is restored – improved, actually – and two couples declare and renew vows. Thanks to the impressive go-betweening skills of Lord Goring, the Chilterns enjoy a newly realistic partnership. Instead of pretending to be a hero who always makes the right decisions, Sir Robert can just be himself with his wife. Lady Chiltern (in a troublingly submissive speech – see more under her "Character Analysis") has promised to accept and forgive.  
  
Lord Goring, who at the beginning of the play seemed unlikely to settle down with anyone, ever, is hitching up with Mabel. Perhaps – and this really is speculation – his successful resolution of the Chiltern's problems makes him feel ready to be a husband. All we know is that funny, lively, indulgent Mabel seems to be a good match for him. The end of the play presses home the point that in a relationship, its better to be "real" than "ideal."

**Analysis: Plot Analysis**

## Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients: the initial situation, conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion. Great writers sometimes shake up the recipe and add some spice.

## Initial Situation - Sir Robert Chiltern is at the peak of his career.

The play starts with a big party filled with glitterati – an expression of the political celebrity Sir Robert has become. Party chatter allows the characters to give their two cents on the Chilterns. We learn off the bat that the Lady Chiltern and Sir Robert are "serious," "brilliant," and "of the highest principles."

## Conflict - Mrs. Cheveley threatens to expose Sir Robert's past crime.

Mrs. Cheveley busts out her blackmail plan, and the security that Sir Robert felt just two drinks ago evaporates. If he doesn't endorse her crooked investment, she'll tell everyone he got rich quick by selling state secrets as a young man. What if that whole group of socialites downstairs got the news? We can imagine them silently setting down their silver and walking out, or even more fun, tossing oily artichoke hearts at Sir Robert's head.

## Complication - Lady Chiltern won't allow Sir Robert to give in the Mrs. Cheveley.

Now Sir Robert's really stuck between a rock and a hard place – between two strong women who hate each other. On the one side, Mrs. Cheveley threatens public ruin. On the other, Lady Chiltern will revoke her love if Sir Robert does what Mrs. Cheveley says.

**Climax**

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### Lord Goring confronts Mrs. Cheveley.

We puzzled about this for a moment. The exciting scene in the library looks like a climax. All the physical symbols of the conflict are in play: the letter to Baron Arnheim, the brooch-bracelet Mrs. Cheveley stole, and Lady Chiltern's letter on pink stationary. It feels like a climax – the usually cucumber-like Lord Goring almost physically attacks Lady Cheveley. And it sounds like a climax, the dialogue full of question marks and exclamations points accelerating to the bell that sounds for Phipps.  
  
Then why the puzzlement? Because the protagonist, Sir Robert, is nowhere in sight, and it's customary for the protagonist to be involved in the climax. In this play, however, Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley are the most active characters, so it makes sense that the climax takes place between them. Take a look at "Character Roles" for a discussion of Sir Robert as the passive protagonist.

## Suspense - The morning of the speech.

We're back at the Chilterns on the morning of the speech, and we don't quite know what will happen. Because Sir Robert doesn't know that the Arnheim letter (i.e., the source for Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail) has been burned, he could still publicly support the Argentine scheme. He could lose Lady Chiltern. His wife could demand that he rent a cave somewhere for them to live in so he's not tempted by power again.

## Denouement - Lady Chiltern swears her support for Sir Robert.

Because of her decidedly submissive speech of love, we know that Lady Chiltern will have Sir Robert's back, no matter what. She's not even going to make him go hermit. The mini-complication in which Sir Robert refuses to let Lord Goring marry Mabel allows Lady Chiltern to come totally clean and further reaffirm her love.

## Conclusion

### Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern are reconciled; Lord Goring and Mabel are engaged.

Wilde serves up the classic comic ending. Marriage!